

“INTRODUCING AMERICA TO AMERICANS”: FSA PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE
CONSTRUCTION OF RACIALIZED AND GENDERED CITIZENS

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2015

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ABSTRACT

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Historians and artists have examined the Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information (FSA-OWI) Photographic Collection as a broad and deep account of Depression era US experience, and as a valuable collection of early documentary photography. During the Depression, FSA photographs had everyday life implications for those experiencing rural poverty; the images were made and circulated in order to garner support for rural rehabilitation programs. Simultaneously, the images were circulated as visual representations of “Americans” and the rural US citizen. Problematically, the images were circulated within a modern framework of straight photography in connection to a discourse of objectivity. I consider the photographic project within the historical moment in which it was created with a specific focus on the influence of dominant constructions of race, motherhood, and poverty.

The impetus for this research stems from a 1935 photograph by Dorothea Lange of a Mexican-American mother and child which is strikingly similar to her iconic 1936 “Migrant Mother.” In stark contrast to the icon, the image to which I refer as the “1935 Migrant Mother” was rendered invisible within the national imaginary. These two images serve as an entry point through which to consider the entire archive in terms of those images of rural mothers and motherhood that were popularly circulated and those images that were left unseen, unprinted, or unmade. I ask how popular readings of FSA photographs as objective or “true” impacted the material which circulated and that which were excluded from the dominant frame.

Using written materials between the photographic unit director, field photographers, and media in conjunction with analysis of circulated photographs of mothers, I argue that the FSA photographs served as popular representations of those who could be imagined as possibly

“deserving poor,” “client family,” “rehabilitatable mother,” and “US citizen.” The representation of these categories included, almost exclusively, white-appearing subjects. Using FSA photographs of mothers which were not circulated and contain subjects identified as “Mexican,” I analyze images of Mexican mothers in relation to dominant racial constructions and trends in the circulated FSA photographs. I argue that representations of Mexican mothers reflected and reinforced the gendered racialization of Mexicans in the US at the time. The analysis of representations of Mexican mothers unveils a history of marginalization and exclusion through the lack of existing images, the lack of varied representation, and the lack of circulation. I conclude by discussing the significance of the way FSA photographs inform the contemporary national imaginary of who is possibly a citizen. My research is historical, but carries implications for contemporary photographic production, consumption, and archival interpretation. By complicating such a well-known archive, it becomes possible to imagine new ways of seeing through a conscious, critical lens.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the members of my dissertation committee. Special thanks to my advisor Susana Peña for your guidance and support. I could not have asked for a more committed, challenging, and thoughtful mentor. To Lynn Whitney for your enthusiasm for the project and for modeling a way of reading photographs to which I continue to aspire. To Andrew Hershberger for the courses I took with you and feedback about my research. To Danielle Kuhl for your thorough and awesome edits on the final draft.

My research at the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division was made possible through the kindness of friends and strangers. I am especially indebted to Beverly Brannan, Curator of Photography, and the wonderful staff including Jeff Bridgers, Jon Eaker, and Kristi Finefield who helped to introduce me to the FSA-OWI Collection. To Johni Amos for finding me lovely hosts and drawing me a detailed map of DC. To Tracy, Ben, and Lulu Hardaway, you welcomed me into your home and made my research possible.

I am very privileged to have had the help and encouragement of many excellent people during my graduate education and with this work especially. In particular, I'd like to thank: Amberlyn Britt, Kate Schaab, Mallory Jagodzinski, Mallory Mann, Heather Sloane, Luis Moreno, Radhika Gajjala, Vibha Bhalla, and Ellen Berry.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to the many friends and family that have supported me before and during the process of writing this dissertation. I extend endless thanks for the years of patience, love, and support. Finally, to my unflinchingly supportive husband Nick. You wore many hats during this process and did so expertly. There will never be words to thank you enough. Te amo.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In March 1936, Dorothea Lange made a series of photographs of a woman and her children at a migrant camp in California. The photographs were just a few of the hundreds that Lange would contribute as a photographer for the Resettlement Administration (RA) and later Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographic unit. Lange was one of multiple field photographers whose pictures contributed to The Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection (FSA-OWI Photograph Collection) that ultimately comprised 170,000 negatives. Compiled from 1935-1943, the final collection of images is the result of a feverish drive to capture the rural “American” experience of Depression era poverty for a national audience. Roy Stryker, the director of the photographic unit, told biographer Nancy Wood that the goal was to “record on film as much of America in terms of the people and the land.” Stryker felt that the photographs were successful and that the office “ended up with as well-rounded a picture of American life during that period as anyone could get.”¹ As a project that would depict who and what was “America,” Stryker’s vision of the FSA photographic unit transcended an individual vision to a national conception. Exhibitions, monographs, and news articles containing photographs were frequently titled to indicate that the photographs did not only encapsulate Depression era subjects but also symbolized the “American” subject and citizen².

From thousands of images, a few rose to national consciousness; one in particular took on a new life as not one of thousands, but as one that could represent the whole: an icon of

¹ Nancy C. Wood, “Portrait of Stryker,” in *In This Proud Land: America, 1935-1943, as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 10–21. 15.

² Some examples include Walker Evan’s 1938 MOMA exhibit “American Photographs,” monographs like Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor’s 1939, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, and news articles like *Current History*’s April 1939 “Refugees of the Dust Bowl: At the mercy of disease, hunger and privation, 200,000 good Americans are living in misery.”

Depression era America. Now known by the title “Migrant Mother,” this image is one of the series Lange made in March 1936. It originally held the caption “Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. Migrant agricultural worker’s family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32, the father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute.” Stryker looked back on the photograph as “the ultimate...it was the picture of Farm Security.”³ The image has been celebrated as document, portraiture, photography, and as tangible evidence of human resilience: American strength in the face of adversity.

I grew up familiar and interested in photography. I knew Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” and after years of seeing it in galleries, tacked to office walls, or printed on t-shirts, I began to feel I was born knowing it. But I did not always know this image, and not until I began asking different questions did I truly realize how little I knew about a photograph that so many consider familiar. In many ways I was part of that audience for which “Migrant Mother” functions as iconic. It reads as a symbol of the time in which it was taken. By acting as symbol, “Migrant Mother” illuminates one part of Depression era experience and also comes to encompass the whole of the time period. The image becomes the time period. Through this process, the image effaces other experiences by centralizing its own. Neither the image nor the artist is at fault for the symbolic process that iconic images take on. It becomes the responsibility of the viewer to question what has been included and excluded from the frame. By questioning, it becomes possible to reframe, reimagine, and to see anew these once familiar images. My research developed after I saw a seemingly familiar image (fig. 1.1) in the Library of Congress FSA-OWI Digital Archives.

³ Ibid. 19.



FIGURE 1.1 Mexican mother in California. “Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me ‘We don’t want to go, we belong here.’” (Note on Mexican labor situation in repatriation.), by Dorothea Lange, 1935.

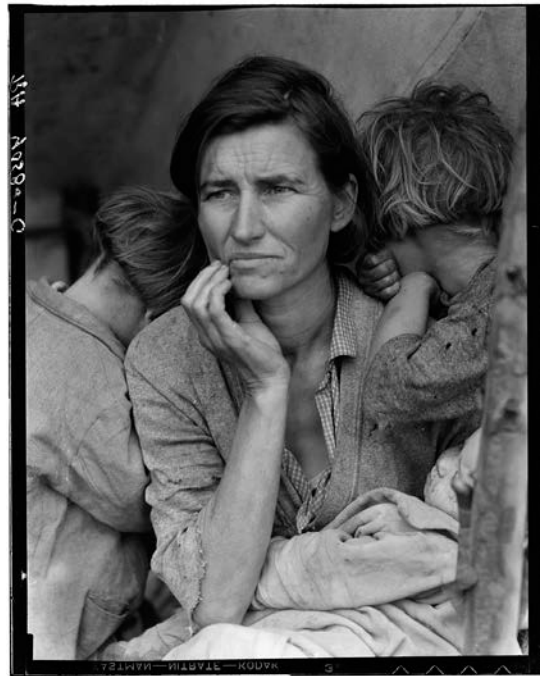


FIGURE 1.2 Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California, by Dorothea Lange, 1936.

Lange made figure 1.1⁴ one year before she made the image of Florence Henderson (fig. 1.2).

This image includes the caption “Mexican mother in California. ‘Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me ‘We don’t want to go, we belong here.’ (Note on Mexican labor situation in repatriation.)’” The caption identifies the subject as Mexican, categorizing 1935 Migrant Mother in a way that 1936 Migrant Mother’s does not. 1935 Migrant Mother (fig. 1.1) was never popularly circulated, nor did it become an icon; it has remained for the most part one of thousands of unseen images within the FSA archive. The striking similarity

⁴ The quality of the photographic reproductions included throughout this study varies due to the format in which they are preserved. Those images that come from the LOC-FSA digital archive are high-resolution scanned negatives. However, reproductions of circulated images (found in chapter 3) are reproduced from the newsprint. Photographs in newsprint are already degraded versions of the original; moreover, the reproductions herein are scans of those reproductions from microfilm. As a result, some of the reproductions are not ideal. For the purposes of this analysis, I determined that seeing the images, even in a lower quality state, is vital to the research and will prove helpful to the reader.

between the two images and the radical differences in their circulation begs the question, why did the 1936 Migrant Mother (fig. 1.2) become the icon and why did the 1935 Migrant Mother (fig. 1.1) remain unknown? What does the iconicity of the “Migrant Mother” (fig. 1.2) illuminate about FSA photography as a project of the Depression? The existence of two such similar images of mothers suffering from rural poverty made me want to know more about why they have had such different material lives. The contrasting material trajectories, where 1935 Migrant Mother is excluded from the national imaginary and 1936 Migrant Mother is widely known, suggests selective circulation of FSA photographs.

Further complicating this question, historian Sally Stein writes about the disconnect between the popular consumption of the icon as a “European American...New Deal Madonna”⁵ while the subject, Florence Henderson, publicly identified as Cherokee in multiple interviews in the 1970s and 1980s with journalist Bill Ganzel. Regardless of whether Henderson identified herself as Cherokee with Lange, there are no racial markers within the written caption to identify her as Anglo or Cherokee. The absence of any racial marker within the caption (and later the title) made it possible for the national US audience to identify the subject, Florence’s likeness, as European American. The subject in the image was presumed white for almost four decades and Stein notes that in the years since the Ganzel interviews, studies of the image continue to identify the “Migrant Mother” as white. For Stein, this illustrates the power of a hegemonic gaze, which centralizes white identity throughout the historical narrative regardless of evidence suggesting otherwise. Stein’s findings inform this study in terms of the shifting nature of racialization and the impact of the historical moment on the meanings applied to Lange’s image.

⁵ Sally Stein, “Passing Likeness: Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother and the Paradox of Iconicity,” *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, 2003, 345–55. 347.

I argue that the images were funneled in to (or out of) popular view through a series of editorial and political processes. These processes functioned to reinforce and reflect hegemonic constructions of poverty, citizenship, and motherhood. There are many histories, including Stein's, which consider Dorothea Lange's contribution to the FSA photographic unit and her efforts to make photography that would promote social justice. My research uses a comparative critical approach to understand the impact of straight photographic discourse upon FSA photographic representations of hegemonic and marginalized identities. Specifically, I analyze how Mexican⁶ mothers in the US were imagined in comparison to circulated depictions of mothers as FSA clients. My research focuses on the FSA photographs as a program within the framework of the New Deal in order to ask how such a body of work was eventually distilled into a few images that may or may not reflect the goals of the individual photographers who made them.

Background

Begun in 1935 and controlled by Presidential Economic Advisor Rexford Tugwell, the Resettlement Administration (RA) office within FDR's New Deal agency organized collaborative farming communities as a sustainable response to the Dust Bowl.⁷ Criticized and feared as a socialist project, the RA was by and large declared a failure in the court of public opinion. By 1937, the RA would no longer continue as an independent agency. The office was

⁶ Within this work, I will refer to Mexicans in the US as a way to encompass migrants, immigrants, and American citizens of Mexican descent. During the early 20th century and notably in the 1930 census, all of these groups were racialized as "Mexican" –a separate race, not black and not white. Additionally, I distinguish when referring to situations that were migrant, immigrant, or citizen specific. This was the only time Mexican was counted as race.

⁷ Centralized in the Great Plains, the Dust Bowl occurred in 1930 as a result of extended drought and loose top soil. The result was great dust storms, most notably "Black Sunday" on April 14, 1945, which left the land uninhabitable and impossible to farm.

transferred to the Department of Agriculture and by June of that same year the RA was absorbed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in hopes of revitalizing rural rehabilitation efforts. The FSA integrated “the RA’s programs, including the rural rehabilitation, farm loan, and subsistence homestead programs.”⁸ FSA rehabilitation efforts included resettling families, sustainable agricultural training, free medical care, and farm loans, all of which were developed to help rural families escape poverty.

Within the RA and later the FSA, the Historical Section was established in order to garner social and congressional support for the New Deal programs it represented. Economist Roy Stryker was appointed head of the Historical Section by Tugwell, and together they determined that the office’s central focus would be a photographic file of America. Historian John Tagg notes “Stryker and the FSA commissioned photographers to create a particular sense of crisis of the American south and west, to represent social disintegration and human misery within the terms of paternal philanthropy of President Roosevelt’s reform strategy.”⁹ The resulting Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection (FSA-OWI Photograph Collection) was made between 1935 and 1943 by a photographic unit dispersed on assignments throughout the country. Among the photographic unit were photographers Arthur Rothstein, Marion Post Wolcott, Ben Shahn, John Vachon, Russell Lee, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Gordon Parks, Esther Bubley and others. The Historical Section was transferred to the FSA under the Department of Agriculture in 1937 and remained there until 1941. From 1941-1943 the photographic unit existed as part of the Office of War Information (OWI). At this time, the goals of the photographic assignments changed dramatically to support the OWI’s wartime

⁸ Joseph Gaer, *Toward Farm Security: The Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration* (Washington D.C.: Govt. print. off., 1941).

⁹ John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2009).

goals, “the dissemination of information to the American public and overseas.”¹⁰ My research focuses on the years from 1935 until 1941 during which the Historical Section’s photographic unit was affiliated with the RA or FSA and focused on depicting rural American life.

Lange’s images were produced for the FSA-OWI Photograph Collection which was developed to garner political and social economic support for those in rural poverty during the Depression. The images made by FSA photographers were utilized during the Depression in popular magazines, art exhibitions, and poster campaigns. The subjects represented in the circulated images served to indicate the population that could hope to access FSA resources, and also represented who were most likely to garner sympathy and support for FSA programs from the wider public. Historian and collection expert Carl Fleischhauer describes the collection: “The photographs document American life from the middle of the Depression to the early years of the War. And they tell us about some of the concerns of the Roosevelt administration and about the roles of the three sponsoring agencies.”¹¹ During the years the project was active, it served as a mode for informing the masses. In the years since its creation, the collection has informed the national imaginary about individual and collective American experience, documentary photography, and New Deal programs.

Today the FSA-OWI Photograph Collection is housed at the Library of Congress (LOC). The collection includes 170,000 negatives, of which the Historical Section office staff, led by Stryker, selected 77,000 to print and file. The selected prints were then mounted and paired with captions written by the corresponding photographer. The 77,000 prints make up the File, a

¹⁰ “Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives - About This Collection,” 1935, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/>.

¹¹ Carl Fleischhauer, “Transcript of ‘About the FSA Collection,’” Moving image, The Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Photo Collection (Library of Congress Journeys and Crossings), accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/journey/fsa-about-transcript.html>.

lasting photographic record of America, which Stryker saw as his ultimate goal for the project. Additionally, the File was the media's resource for image selections during the life of the Historical Section. Any frame that was not included in the File was not considered for circulation.

This study looks at the FSA Historical Section from 1935-1941. I considered the production and circulation of FSA photographs, examining unprinted negatives, printed photographs, and images selected and reproduced by the media. In addition, I analyzed archived office documents correspondence, and training materials. I examined the FSA Historical Section as it existed and was created at the conjuncture of historically specific race, gender, and class constructions. I understand these categories, as they existed in the historical moment as hegemonic, naturalized discourses of structural power and oppression. I also explore at how these discourses manifested in the framework of the FSA generally and within the Historical Section specifically. From this intersectional consideration of the Historical Section, I investigate the Photographic File in two ways. First, I examine those circulated images that include depictions of mothers. Through coding and in-depth visual analysis, I argue that this body of images is a visual representation of those considered possible FSA clients. I find that possible FSA clients were discursively constructed as deserving poor, good mothers, and US citizens. Second, and in contrast to the body of circulated images, I look at images identified via captions as "Mexican" with a specific focus on mothers. This body of images was left almost entirely outside of circulation. Focusing on the racialization of Mexican and Mexican-American mothers in the US, I analyze the images in terms of conception, production, and circulation. I do this in order to ask how mothers identified as Mexican in the US were imagined by the program and whether the contents reflect or challenge dominant discourses.

I present a critical consideration of those images, which were used (i.e. printed for the File and reprinted for popular use) and those frames that were not used (i.e. never printed for the official File, remain as stored negatives). I contend that decisions regarding what subjects to photograph, which photographs to print and file, and which of those to circulate reflect conjunctural processes of selection and exclusion. From a critical framework, this research considers how such processes reinforced and reflected dominant discourses of race, class and gender. As documentary photographs, the circulated images were popularly understood as reflections of the material world and as “true.” While acknowledging that the photographs were and are popularly read as truth, I complicate this truth-value. In doing so, it becomes possible and imperative to ask questions about who was represented in the archive, why they were shown that way, and what social processes were driving such representations.

I begin with the primary questions: who was depicted as “American” in Depression Era rural US and who was imagined as capable/worthy of rehabilitation within the printed and circulated photographs. How are the historically specific contexts of gender and race reflected, reinforced, or challenged by the photographic depictions of mothers and children? In what ways did circulated photographs construct RA/FSA client families? Are white appearing and Mexican appearing families represented similarly in circulated materials? If not, are there images of Mexican families, particularly mothers, and what do these images depict (in terms of race, gender, and poverty: because these are main themes for FSA client classification)? I contend that by constructing the ideal candidate as a US citizen whose social citizenship was reliant on whiteness, the use of FSA photographs also constructed, in contrast, bodies read as Mexican as alien and outside of the possibility for help from the FSA. Throughout this study, I refer to the image known as “Migrant Mother” (fig 1.2) as 1936 Migrant Mother and to figure 1.1 as 1935

Migrant Mother in order to distinguish between these two images without racializing either in ways that might reinforce the racial scripts that were perpetuated throughout the life of the Historical Section. I also find it helpful to rename both images in a way that aligns them so as to denaturalize racializing and gendered discourses which may have circulated around them by way of caption, title or selection processes.

Review of Literature

Literature about FSA photography comes from various traditions including fine art, art history, and American history. In the years during which the photographic unit was active, multiple books were published to highlight RA/FSA photography from both artistic and social perspectives. Many of these texts were efforts of RA/FSA photographers as they worked to distill their project work and make names for themselves as photographers. Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) was celebrated as a great commercial success at the time of publication, but was later critiqued for its staged images and fictitious quotes.¹² *American Exodus*, by Taylor and Lange (1939) was produced with a focus on achieving greater accuracy than *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Writer James Agee's 1941 collaborative effort with Walker Evans, which resulted in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, focused on three white sharecropping families suffering in poverty while working tenant farms. The book is organized by themes including "near the church," "clothing," "shelter," "education," and "work." These themes speak directly to the goals of the FSA as a rural rehabilitation agency, and the directives given to the photographic unit to represent rural poverty and American life. These themes resurfaced in FSA documentation and were informative to the overall

¹² Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images As History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, Reprint edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990).

consideration of the collection. Texts like Agee and Evans' reinforce the evidence provided by official FSA documents, which suggest the FSA as an organization propagated certain ideals in terms of who could be rehabilitated through education. *Roy Stryker: The Humane Propagandist* (1977) was produced to accompany the exhibit of the same name at the University of Louisville. The text is a tribute to the life and works of Stryker, as director of the RA/FSA Historical Section and other photographic projects afterwards. The text provides some insight into the sense of freedom Stryker had within the RA/FSA and the loss of this power he endured when the FSA was absorbed by Office of War Information (at the start of WWII), a transition which spurred his leaving.

Works including *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, William Stott's *Documentary Expressions*, and John Tagg's *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* discuss FSA images in relation to photographic theory, vision, and documentary production. Blair and Rosenberg's *Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA* also contributes to the conversation by providing a focus on the documentary image as it relates to trauma. Within *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee and Evans discuss photographic vision, camera use and misuse, specifically as "a corruption of sight"¹³ and as widespread through the photography community and they contrast this to the few whose sight is trustworthy. The implication is that those who correctly produced "straight photography" were producing documents that could be trusted. Straight photographic methods were generally characterized by lack of cropping and any other "alteration" in printing, sharp focus, and long depth of field. This conversation reflects the centrality of straight photographic discourse and maintaining objectivity in images among photographers and critics at this time.

¹³ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

William Stott's *Documentary Expressions* explains that in 1938, Edward Steichen popularized the term "documentary" as a distinct genre at this time identified by "an effort to convey 'knowledge of public facts.'"¹⁴ Defining the term by comparing the works of popular documentarians, including Margaret Bourke-White and the FSA's Walker Evans, who was eventually let go from the Historical Section for failing to produce usable photographs,¹⁵ Stott concludes that "the FSA photographers were compiling a 'picture record of rural America.'" They told the stories with "simple and blunt directness."¹⁶ The FSA images are also romanticized in regards to their purposes as social support. Stott explains that some of the images made by FSA photographers framed subjects to elicit empathy and reduced and exploited the subjects for the purposes of the project: "never are they vicious, never depraved, never responsible for their misery. And of course this was intentional."¹⁷ He notes that Stryker directed the photographers to seek out the everyday American experience rather than that which was spectacular.¹⁸ Stott's work provides context for documentary photography as it developed out of and modeled itself on the FSA photographic works. He also provides more evidence of the gravity in representing the real, for both the FSA and for the American audience. Stott's work discusses the FSA in order to interrogate documentary photography from its beginnings. He suggests the processes of selection that led to framing subjects sympathetically, as deserving poor. My research asks what "successful" versus "unsuccessful" photographs of rural American families looked like and how

¹⁴ William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

¹⁵ Many of the images produced by Evans for the FSA have come to serve as emblematic of the project. Additionally, his book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published with James Agee's text, is one of the most popular compilations of FSA photography to this day.

¹⁶ Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. 12.

¹⁷ Ibid. 58.

¹⁸ Ibid. 50.

these depictions reflected or reinforced FSA goals. How did the photographs depict deserving or underserving poor? Who was understood to be an everyday American? Who was not? Stott notes, “We must realize that all documentary photographs, like all propaganda and indeed all exposition, are to some extent biased communication. Most documentary photos of the thirties were not intentionally deceptive...but all prejudiced their evidence in selecting it.”¹⁹ It is this process of selection to which I am so drawn. To extend Stott’s words regarding unintentional deception, this research is attempting to disrupt the idea that any one person can be held up as the mind or eye behind documentary selection. Documentary selection occurs within the context of hegemonic ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and ability. It is also, in the case of the FSA, the result of regional assignments and choices made by photographers, office staff, government representatives, and press staff. All of which lead to the popularity or obscurity of a frame or body of images.

Also considering documentary photography, John Tagg’s *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* works from a similar theoretical framework as this project. Tagg theorizes documentary photography as a disciplinary structure. He argues not that photography is foundationally disciplinary, but that the act of framing within the context of social scripts makes it so. His brief discussion of gender considers the bodily implication of the FSA employing and sending women photographers into the field alone.²⁰ In conversation with Tagg’s work, this research is interested in the role of straight photographic discourse and method as a discursive structure which likely impacted the creation and national conceptions the FSA-OWI Photograph Collection.

¹⁹ Ibid. 61.

²⁰ For consideration of woman photographers in the field and the navigation of identities as women and as photographer see: biographic accounts of Dorothea Lange and Marion Post Wolcott.

Finally, Blair and Rosenberg's *Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA* discusses the impulse to publicize suffering amid the canonization of documentary photography. In line with Stott, they explain that for the FSA, "the camera's power was to document."²¹ They also note that other endeavors to capture Depression era American life occurred within music, fiction, WPA guidebooks, and radio. In comparison to the other medium mentioned by Blair and Rosenberg, the lasting effect of the FSA Collection speaks to the power of photography when consumed as the type of "document" they and Stott describe. Blair and Rosenberg argue that some of the photographers from Jewish backgrounds "understood trauma in racialized terms and because of that, understood it as part of a far longer historical trajectory of suffering and discrimination."²² The FSA photographers, many Jewish immigrants or children of Eastern European Jews, were in the US largely as a result of trauma: "pogroms in Eastern Europe, the Soviet revolution...Stalinist purges, rise of the Third Reich."²³ This made certain photographers less likely to frame their subjects as victims or helpless.²⁴ Considering the role of trauma informs this work as it relates to Tagg's disciplinary frame. I analyze the images in the archive from the perspective of critical theory in terms of race, gender, and photography, in order to understand how the process of selection also renders exclusion. In terms of the FSA, that exclusion reinforced racializing logics that are tied to trauma.

Several contemporary works provide critical inquiries of FSA photography from feminist perspectives. Andrea Fisher's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Women: Women Photographers for*

²¹ Sara Blair and Eric Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA* (Univ of California Press, 2012). 3.

²² Ibid. 8.

²³ Ibid. 12.

²⁴ Ibid. 12.

the U.S. Government, 1935 to 1944: Esther Bubley, Marjory Collins, Pauline Ehrlich, Dorothea Lange, Martha McMillan Roberts, Marion Post Wolcott, Ann Rosener, Louise Rosskam (1989) centralizes the work of woman FSA photographers, many of whom remain fairly obscure in the historiography of RA/FSA photography. Jacqueline Ellis' "Revolutionary Spaces: Photographs of Working Class Women by Esther Bubley, 1940-1943" argues that Bubley, unlike her more famous colleagues Lange and Wolcott, subverted FSA scripts by refusing to Other her subjects for her audience. Linda Gordon's biography of Lange, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, positions Lange as anti-racist and democratic in her approach to making photographs and captions for the FSA. Gordon discusses Lange within the social contexts in which she lived, including the influence of feminism and sexism on Lange's career. She finds Lange to be a trailblazer for women in photography and for documentary photography generally. This broad biographic account of Lange points to the social structures on which my research focuses. While Gordon discusses the social and cultural contexts in order to better understand Dorothea Lange, my research builds on this by considering the social and cultural contexts in relation to the Historical Section as part of a federal program.

I found the total body of works that present a gendered analysis of FSA photography to be fuller than those which centrally consider race. Two standout works that do focus on race are Erina Duganne's *The Self in Black and White: Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography* (2010) and Nicholas Natanson's *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (1992). *The Self in Black and White* considers photographic representations of Blackness created within the New York City area, some of which include FSA images. She argues that these images of poverty reinforce constructions of Blackness while simultaneously calling for new readings of government sponsored art shows including "Profile of Poverty"

(1965)²⁵ produced by the Office of Economic Opportunity. The show continued the goal of “controlling the viewer’s inter-subjective understanding of poverty both in terms of ‘the effects of privation and the effects being mounted against it in the War on Poverty.’”²⁶ FSA photography was not the first, but is often identified as a turning point, at which time the photographic medium was perceived as a producer of human documents. The project was emulated by later endeavors including the 1960s White House Photography Program, headed by John Szarkowski and created under President Lyndon Johnson as part of an anti-poverty program. Duganne identifies FSA photography as an influence on Steichen’s interest in photography as humanistic medium and on 1960s civil rights photography. Duganne considers the humanistic documentary/social documentary approach as the pivotal connection between FSA and civil-rights photography. Her work emphasizes the lasting impact of the FSA Photographic Unit on other photographic endeavors which seek to “effect social change” or serve as “historical evidence.”²⁷

Natanson’s *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (1992) also considers FSA photography as it intersects with race. Natanson’s work focuses on representations of African Americans in the archive. Using a comparative contextual historical framework, Natanson considers representation of Black subjects who are the central focus, in the background, or alluded to through marketing or signage within FSA images. He notes that two African-American photographers were hired to the FSA photographic unit and as such, representation of Black subjects was higher than what it might have been otherwise. However,

²⁵ The show included images from the FSA and more contemporary images.

²⁶ Erina Duganne, *The Self in Black and White: Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography* (Hanover, N.H: Dartmouth, 2010). 69.

²⁷ Ibid. 96.

few images of African-Americans were reproduced in subsequent publications. In line with my research, Natanson regards the specific choices of the photographer as variables that scripted representation as objective. Natanson points to the different compositional choices made by photographers with white versus Black subjects. He considers physical positions, camera angles (shooting down), and lighting (distortion, deforming, “menacing shadows”).²⁸ Natanson concludes the depiction of Black subjects is less heavy handed and more open to multiple interpretations in images of white subjects. I find his approach helpful in centering images that present open interpretations and multiple meanings in opposition to those that are framed in such a way as to lead the audience to limited, more heavily scripted conclusions about the subject. Natanson’s work discusses race during the time of the New Deal and the FSA in order to contextualize visual analysis. FDR and the New Deal placed “‘national’ (i.e.: white) priorities above minority concerns.”²⁹ Natanson also argues “there were hundreds of local administrators of New Deal, programs for whom racial discrimination was second nature.”³⁰

My research is informed by the existing literature and builds on the small body of works that focus on the FSA and social cultural contexts of race and gender. I imagine my work in conversation with that of Duganne and particularly that of Natanson. Like both of their works, I am considering the role race played in the photographic unit. I chose to focus on the racialization of Mexican mothers in the US in order to complicate the dominant black-white paradigm through which race is so often discussed in the US. For the most part, the existing works consider these contexts in isolation; my project attempts to consider how constructions of race and gender

²⁸ Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of Fsa Photography*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). 64.

²⁹ Ibid. 14.

³⁰ Ibid. 14.

worked intersectionally. I center these contexts in relation to FSA photographic processes of production and circulation and the subsequent representation and exclusion of Mexican mothers in the US.

Theoretical Frameworks

My research is grounded in the race theory of Michael Omi and Howard Winant; *Racial Formation in the United States* provides a framework for approaching race as both formation and project that is contingent, shifting, and structurally embedded. I work from Omi and Winant's definition of race as "an unstable and 'decentered' complex set of social meanings constantly transformed by political struggle."³¹ Omi and Winant's model of racial formation theorizes the State as inherently racial wherein racial projects exist and perform work along the entire political spectrum. Based on this, race is a "matter of both social structure and cultural representation."³² I consider the FSA photographs as a form of cultural representation produced by the State for the purposes of representing and propagating a specific image of poverty as it connected to Americanness, citizenship, and federal help. I work to understand the archive as cultural representation in relation to the social structure in which it was made. Omi and Winant explain that within racial formation processes, racial projects interpret, explain, and represent racial dynamics and also "reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines."³³ I am interested in the FSA photographic unit as a racial project, which reinforced and reflected the

³¹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994). 53.

³² Ibid. 56.

³³ Ibid. 56.

racialization³⁴ of Mexicans in the US during the Depression. This was a period of heightened nativism towards Mexicans in the US during which the negotiation of social and legal citizenship was closely tied to constructions of race.

As this study interrogates the conflation of nation with race and the representation of this conflation in material form, I also draw from the work of rhetorician Barbara Biesecker who discusses the circulation of public media that serves to manufacture certain kinds of citizens and national identities. Biesecker notes the growing “theoretical and critical literature on the relationship between the nation, the media, and the discursive production of the citizen-subject.”³⁵ She refers to “technologies of national cultural transformation [which] promote social cohesion by rhetorically inducing differently positioned audiences...to disregard rather than actively to seek to dismantle the inequitable power relations that continue to structure collective life in the United States.”³⁶ Biesecker provides this study with a way to consider the viewing experience of a multiplicity of identities when faced with the ideal or “iconic” discursively produced citizen.

Erika Lee’s work on gatekeeping and the State informs this work both contextually and theoretically. She challenges the popular celebration of immigration as a fulfillment of the promise of American democracy in favor of a more critical reading that centralizes (rather than erases) institutionalized racism as a mode for the exclusion of immigrants from full social, cultural and political citizenship. Gatekeeping, as theorized by Lee, distinguishes “certain

³⁴ Omi and Winant. 35. Refer to racialization “to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one.”

³⁵ Barbara A. Biesecker, “Remembering World War II: The Rhetoric and Politics of National Commemoration at the Turn of the 21st Century,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4 (2002): 393–409. 408n13.

³⁶ Ibid. 394.

immigrants as threatening, unassimilable, and even inferior on the basis of their race, religion, culture, labor, and gender.”³⁷ Functionally building legal gatekeeping, “the State itself is an actor that both influences the society it governs and reshapes the social political and economic relationships within society.”³⁸ In chapter 4, I outline the role immigration policy played in racializing Mexicans in the US, including immigration restrictions and repatriation. Moreover, the discourse developed around controlling bodies that were imagined as threatening; in this case much of the discussion was about Mexican mothers and fertility, and was used to justify legal gatekeeping. The discourse also served as a form of ideological gatekeeping. Lee asserts the importance of looking beyond forms of legal gatekeeping and examining the role of ideological gates that also exist to exclude and restrict those she identifies as “immigrant groups.”³⁹ I consider the Historical Section within the context of the State as a racial project that served as a form of ideological gatekeeping towards Mexican mothers and their families in the US.

Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the post-structural feminist theory of intersectionality as a means for understanding multiple and overlapping forms of oppression. Crenshaw explains that “by tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendency to see [identity categories] as exclusive or separable.”⁴⁰ My research maps the intersections of race, class, gender, and nation as categories that framed the Historical Section’s conception of successful versus unsuccessful images. All of these categories

³⁷ Erika Lee, “American Gatekeeping: Race and Immigration Law in the Twentieth Century,” in *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States* (Russell Sage, 2004), 119–44. 121

³⁸ Ibid. 121.

³⁹ Lee specifies the role of both legal and ideological gates as deployed to control those immigrant groups identified as “threatening” or “unassimilable.”

⁴⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, 1241–99.

are central to the iconography of the 1936 Migrant Mother and to the exclusion of the 1935 Migrant Mother. Focusing on the Mexican mothers and motherhood within the US, I approach the representation of this population as marginalized within multiple categories. I ask how hegemonic constructions of these categories were reflected, reinforced, or challenged within FSA program discourse and photographic representations.

Method

The two Migrant Mother images, 1935 and 1936, have had materially contrasting lives. The first, 1935, remained almost entirely unknown while the second, 1936, became an icon and entered into spheres of fine art, popular culture, and the national imaginary. My method developed out of my interest to understand what this contrast can tell about the creation and use of FSA images. I ventured to show that the iconographic rise of one and erasure of the other was not a random outcome nor was it solely based on aesthetic selection. The aesthetics of the two images are notably similar. Moreover, the trajectories of these two images serve as high profile examples of racialized processes of selection by Historical Section staff, the FSA, and media representatives. For purposes of circulation, the selection of white appearing women served to inform the national audience regarding RA/FSA goals, specifically framing subjects as good mothers, rural Americans, and deserving clients. The exclusion of Mexican mothers in the US from circulated images left Mexican mother and families outside of the boundaries of being imagined as a client, as a good mother, and as American.

The scope of my inquiry is limited to the years during which the Historical Section was held under the RA and later the FSA (1935-1941). When the Historical Section was later absorbed by the OWI, from 1941-1943, the goals for image content shifted from rural America

to war programs; thus I do not include these last years in the scope of the study. Within the years that I include, I focus on those images that represent mothers and domestic space in relation to rural poverty or rehabilitation out of such poverty (via RA/FSA programming). The scope is limited topically to the representation of mothers and motherhood because this is the thematic realm from which the Migrant Mothers are drawn. The Migrant Mother depictions are part of a larger collection of images of mothers within the Archive. Mothers were a thematic focus for the field photographers because, as I explain in chapters 3 and 4, constructions of good mothers were tied deeply to the ability of the rural family to be rehabilitated by the FSA.

To establish the trends in selection and circulation processes, I completed a visual analysis of the Scrapbooks held at the LOC. The Scrapbooks are broad but not exhaustive collections of circulated RA/FSA images. As images were published in picture stories and news reports, the Historical Section staff clipped and attached copies of the stories to the Scrapbook pages. The pages are generally chronological and provide the most complete sense of any RA/FSA record of what images were reproduced and circulated during the life of the photographic unit. I coded the images from January to June for years 1935, 1937, and 1939. I chose these years to cover a broad swath of the RA/FSA photographic unit production. I coded the images based on the RA/FSA goals for rehabilitation of the rural poor, and on the FSA criteria for attaining client status. First, I determined whether the images were depicting external space (outside of a home), landscape (work areas), or domestic sphere (inside home, gardening, laundry). I also determined how many bodies were in the frame, the apparent gender of those bodies, and the number of children. I also accounted for race. This category was and remains problematic because the process of reading race on bodies in these images is based on constructions of race as identified based on phenotype. As illustrated by the 1936 Migrant

Mother, a photograph of a subject read as white might not reflect the individual's life history or identification. As previously mentioned, the subject of the image, Florence Henderson, has been read generally as white, but this constructed whiteness is only based on dominant constructions of "what whiteness looks like" and is contrasted by her identification as Cherokee. At the same time, it is this construction, this reading of bodies as white, or Black, or Mexican that this research interrogates by focusing on the creation and circulation of images of bodies read as white to the exclusion of racialized bodies. As such, I needed to ascertain, as much as possible, the popularly imagined race of the subjects in circulated images. For the most part I used caption content to do this.

I also coded the images in relation to themes, which were connected in some way to poverty, motherhood, or the racialization of Mexicans in the US. I included categories related to racialization of Mexicans in the US in order to frame not only how the images were influenced by FSA goals, but also by gendered and racializing discourses that were circulating around Mexicans in the US. Many of these discourses associated Mexicans in the US with a predisposition to disease, illness, and high fertility rates. I therefore coded for dirt, clutter, disease, death, privy, water, diet, workers, and mothers. Any one image could relate to multiple categories. Reading the image content and captions for connections to these categories is a subjective process; the consistency in this process is that I was the coder for all images. I also analyzed the *Farm Tenancy Report* which was published for government and policy use and *Toward Farm Tenancy* which was a training resource for FSA regional staff. Analysis of the *Farm Tenancy Report* and *Toward Farm Tenancy* provided me with a broader understanding of the published content made for varying purposes (e.g. public awareness, employee training, political support).

I analyzed the body of circulated RA/FSA images in relation to Roy Stryker's Papers, a collection that includes both formal and informal communication. I focused on Historical Section correspondence between Director Roy Stryker and photographers in the field and letters between Stryker and interested media office representatives. The papers contextualized the circumstance and initiatives under which the images were selected, made, and finally circulated as representative of successful RA/FSA photographs. The office correspondence provided insight into the types of images and content that were considered good according to Stryker. Image success was often tied to the effective representation of subjects that the media was interested in printing.

As I outline in chapters 3 and 4, I wanted to compare circulated images of mothers deemed successful with those images of Mexican mothers in the US which were for the most part not circulated. I consider both groups of images in relation to social processes of racialization and gender. Within chapter 4, I focus on those images that were for the most part not circulated. In order to get a sense of what was not published, I analyzed scanned negatives of images of Mexicans in the US within the LOC-FSA digital archive.⁴¹ I chose to focus on images of Mexicans, particularly mothers for several reasons. The research about the Historical Section and archive is extensive, but as a body of images so connected to US national history, there is very little about race in general and even less specifically about Mexicans in the US. The collection was created during a moment that had dramatic impact on Mexican-American history. Depression era US was a time of heightened nativism toward Mexicans; I choose to focus on

⁴¹ The standing File is also housed at the LOC with the collection. Since the 1990s much of the material has been digitized, effectively broadening the audience of the collection and making it easier to view those images not included in the File. In order to make more complex searches possible, the FSA-OWI Photograph Collection curator's continue to add metadata to the digital archive.

how that nativism manifested within this State project which served to visually demarcate the category US citizen.

Within the LOC-FSA digital archive a search for the term “Mexican” with no variants (variants yields results of images from New Mexico) provides 998 image results. This number includes negatives that were not printed for the official File, but which were taken at the same time as those captioned “Mexican.” I centralize my analysis of images on those captioned “Mexican” because these captions signal the audience to read the subject or content as connected to Mexicans in the US. It also signals that the photographer approached the image, in terms of presentation and making the image, with some consciousness of the race of the subject. For the 998, I created a database using the same coding categories considered for the circulated materials. If a single image reflected multiple themes, it was coded as such. Once completed, I considered how the trends in the images of mothers and motherhood in the 998 compared to those in the circulated images. Based on these findings, I selected images for in-depth visual analysis in order to provide specific examples of broader trends. The trends in representations of Mexican mothers and motherhood in the US is contextualized by hegemonic constructions of race and citizenship at this time. The racialization of Mexicans in the US informs the meaning of these images within the specific moment in which they were made.

Position

My academic work focuses on photography as a medium, art, and discursive performance that circulates throughout cultures with the power to affect change, to challenge, and to reinforce dominant hegemonic narratives. I approach this archive from the perspective of someone who has studied fine art photography. I have been studying photography for as long as I can

remember. First I learned informally through documentaries, magazines, and art exhibits and then I more formally worked to strengthen my knowledge of history, technologies, and practice. At the same time, my work in critical race and feminist theory allows me to analyze the images and texts in their social cultural context.

Nationally, the FSA-OWI Photographic Collection is not only well known, but it is renowned historically and artistically. And it should be. However, it is also a material archive whose contents have circulated and reinforced dominant narratives of citizenship. Hiding in the archives' corners, unseen and uncirculated, are images that may disrupt this narrative. Raised in a Jewish home, I was taught about the Holocaust every year of my Jewish education. "Never forget," they would tell us. For me this message has translated into a broader one about the world in which we live. It is surprisingly easy for the histories of those who exist on the margins to disappear. This disappearance is, to my understanding, a key component of forgetting. Disappearances and forgettings allow for oppression to continue uninterrupted.

It is imperative that this research not reproduce the racial formations it is interrogating. The images within this project have the potential to reinforce essentializing images of Mexicans in the US during the Depression. By showing these images, the goal is not to advocate for readings of straight photographic works as objective truth but to present an opening for that which is contained and excluded by the frame. No image can show everything, and this is the crux of this work. Even as this research focuses on rural poverty, it does not discuss urban space and thereby risks reinforcing images of Mexicans as only existing as farm workers. Realizing the limitations of this study is just as important as realizing the limitations of the frame. My standpoint as a white woman in the US places me structurally outside of the population I am writing about in terms of race, and inside of the hegemonic structures of power and privilege that

I work to destabilize. Some will wonder if a woman who is not Mexican can or should write about this topic. This work comes from my situated and examined perspective. It will be different than it would be if anyone else were to write it, but hopefully my reflexivity about my position and my standpoint as feminist, as anti-racist, and as photographer will produce a study that allows for increasingly critical consideration of the photographic archive and the circulation of images therein.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2 considers the impact of straight photographic discourses of objectivity on the FSA selection and circulation of photography. The chapter outlines the development of straight photography as both a way of knowing photographs and as a set of rules for photographic practice. Straight photography and its connection to objectivity and depicting truth are placed in conversation with the practices and goals of the Historical Section. Primarily this chapter considers what it meant for the Historical Section and Stryker to select photography as the central medium for communicating the state of rural American families. The construction of straight photography altered expectations of what pictures should look like and what they meant (interpretation or reality). This chapter provides a look how those developing the project, including Roy Stryker and Rexford Tugwell, conceived of the Historical Section and discussed the use of photography. The way that those central to the project conceived of it and sold it to the media is telling in terms of the presence of straight photography within the Historical Section as an organizing discourse. As a photographic project developed in the modernist turn towards straight photographic methods, the chapter also considers what the circulation of straight photographic discourse might have meant for those seeing the FSA images. The chapter suggests

that claiming objectivity in terms of image making, circulation, and captions facilitated a limited reading of the File.

Photographs, personal correspondence, and related materials produced by the Historical Section are considered within chapters 3 and 4 as they relate to constructions of race (whiteness and Mexican identity), motherhood, and poverty. Chapters 3 and 4 each focus on analysis of the FSA and the Historical Section in order to understand more broadly the trajectory of the migrant mother images. Chapter 3 is a consideration of the icon, the 1936 Migrant Mother; as such the chapter focuses on bodies of circulated images and processes of selection. The chapter outlines processes for selection and circulation from field assignments and picture making to captions and reproduction for press. I reconstruct this process within the context of FSA goals and media requests in order to see how and why certain images of families were selected as more successful (good for circulation) than others. The chapter also presents an overview of the FSA goals for rehabilitation and criteria for potential clients. The goals and criteria delineated those rural American families that would be most likely to qualify for client status (housing and rehabilitation) through the FSA and those that would not. While the photographic unit's purpose was not only to depict possible clients, the chapter discusses the tight link between the possible client family and representations within circulated FSA photographs. I look at how the circulated depictions of mothers and children were reinforcing or challenging the goals and criteria of the agency within which they were made. I find that the dominant trends in depictions of mothers and children align with those identity categories, which were popularly assigned to the 1936 Migrant Mother: American, deserving poor, and white. Harkening back to the Migrant Mothers, the chapter suggests that through the use of objective photographic ways of seeing and selective race-based framing, the circulated FSA images created a visual body of evidence that imagined

the identity of the deserving FSA client. Placing families and mothers who appeared to be Mexican outside of the visual frame of deserving client meant exclusion from the national imaginary in terms of these categories (deserving poor, FSA client, mother, American).

While chapter 3 presents an analysis of those images and identities centralized by the frame, chapter 4 focuses on those images left out. Drawing from the trajectory of the 1935 *Migrant Mother*, this chapter considers the FSA frames containing mothers or motherhood identified as “Mexican” within the LOC digital archive. For the most part, these images were never circulated. I outline the discursive constructions of Mexicans in the US as a changing, shifting racial project that intersects with constructions of women, particularly mothers, and of poverty as a racialized and gendered category. The chapter provides historical and social context in terms of the racialization of Mexicans in the US and constructions of modern motherhood. National discourses of poverty and race inform how mothers read as Mexican would have possibly been interpreted by the photographer, Stryker, and FSA staff. The social and historical contexts of race, gender, and poverty inform my understanding of the circulated images and the images which were made but not filed or circulated. These contexts also speak to those images which were never made. I consider both the lack of images and the content of those images that do exist. In the images that do exist, I find that the images of Mexican mothers are more limited in representation than the depictions of white appearing families. Even when similar themes appeared in images of Mexicans and in circulated images, the interpretation of the content was often different. Contextualized by the racialization of Mexicans, particularly mothers in the US, I argue certain image themes like dirt and disease held different meanings when represented in images of white appearing mothers than when present in images of mothers identified as Mexican. Chapter 4 suggests that the images discussed in chapter 3 visually reinforced prevailing

racial and gendered logics of the time by centralizing white mothers as possible clients. Analysis of the Mexican mother images provides insight into the visual and discursive construction of one racialized population who was excluded from the framework of possible client.

The concluding chapter discusses the contemporary role and lasting impact of the racial scripts that circulated out of the historical archive. While contemporary relationships with images are informed by post-modernism and digital ways of knowing, straight photography's objective discourse remains a dominant framework in the way images are read today. Because the archive does not only exist in the past but is also a continuing part of the American national imaginary, as it informs and frames (literally and figuratively) who is a good mother, farmer, citizen, and US citizen, the final section will present the contemporary implications of the archive. I discuss the lasting prominence of the image of the white, male, citizen as rhetorical metonym for US Farmer. This image continues today in spite of the overwhelming dominance of corporations in contemporary farming in America and the actual demographic composition of people doing agricultural work in the United States. The lasting discursive power of the American Farmer exists in direct conflict with those who faced rural poverty during the Depression but were simultaneously constructed as outside of the boundaries of the categories that qualified anyone for help.

CHAPTER 2. TOWARDS A VIEW FROM SOMEWHERE: THE DISCOURSE OF OBJECTIVITY IN PHOTOGRAPHIC VISION

It is so important that we recognize the value of a graphic portrayal of our life. When I search now for pictures of any phase of American life, even as late as 1900-1910, I realize very keenly the value of the camera as a device to record history.¹

Roy Stryker to Lewis Hine, July 24, 1936

Documentary photography was borne out of early 20th century mechanization, industrialization, and discourses of modernity and progress. The camera as a machine took on the role of renderer of reality where the photographic image was interpreted as one whose nature was tied to objectivity and truth. During this time, the photographic community in the United States turned away from its pictorial past and decidedly toward a new modern aesthetic of “straight”² or “pure” photography. Advocating for straight images, those on the forefront of the photographic movement held strong positions about the purpose and value of the photographic image as a medium capable of providing objective renderings of reality. For the Historical Section, tasked with providing evidence of rural poverty and rehabilitation, there was no better time for the naturalization of straight photographic vision. This chapter examines the creation of the Historical Section as a primarily photographic endeavor sculpted by the straight photographic movement’s claim to objectivity. First, the chapter presents the historical development of objectivity as it became discursively tied to straight photographic methods and presented in opposition to all other methods. Second, correspondence between Director Roy Stryker and field photographers provide insight into the role of dominant photographic discourses in the

¹ Roy Emerson Stryker, David G. Horvath, and University of Louisville, *Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972*, 15 microfilm reels (Louisville : Teaneck, NJ, USA: University of Louisville, University Archives & Records Center ; Exclusive distribution by Chadwyck-Healey, 1978).

² Straight photographs were characterized by an apparent lack of alteration. They were expected to include sharp focus, long depth of field, high contrast, and to remain uncropped.

photographic unit's process. This included the maintenance of said discourses in service of the Historical Section's goals. Individual interviews directed by historian Richard K. Doud in the 1960s, provided Stryker, Rexford Tugwell, and others the platform to reflect on the Historical Section and its photographic unit years later; these interviews provide insight on the project in terms of its meanings and goals. Third, I consider Stryker's approach to captions in order to provide a full view of how the Historical Section's photographic File was constructed and circulated in connection with straight photography discourse. Finally, I place the evidence presented throughout in conversation with theorist Donna Haraway's work on the discourse and effects of "the view from nowhere." In doing so, I suggest the trouble with continuing to reinforce normative conceptions of the File and centralize the importance of critical consciousness in viewing/seeing photographs.

FSA Photographs as Objective Documents

American Studies scholar Alan Trachtenberg asserts in *Classic Essays on Photography* that photography must be understood within the context of the social and cultural spaces through which it is constructed. His work, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, provides insight into the social and cultural structures that influenced the construction of modern photographic discourse in early 20th Century America. At this time, mechanization was conceptualized as progress, and professionalized science supplanted religion as the dominant source of knowledge. Both machine and science became integral to the shape of American identity, society, values, and economy. In factories and on farms, machines replaced manual labor because the machine was determined more efficient, reliable, and replicable. Art, specifically photography, was not exempt from this shift. As a result, the dominant photographic

aesthetic, pictorialism, was rejected in favor of the modernist turn towards straight photography. Analysis of how the FSA photographs were developed and consumed (i.e. how they were read by the audience) is deepened through understanding the details of straight photography as the dominant method and discourse of photography during the life of the FSA program.

From the inception of photography,³ practitioners and theorists attempted to establish it as an art while faced with frequent comparisons to painting. As a result, much of photography's early life existed as an exclusive practice. Its exclusivity came by design; first to define it as art, and second from a practical perspective because early processes and equipment were labor intensive and expensive. The industrialization of the United States facilitated the democratization of photography. Smaller cameras and roll film allowed a much broader audience to take part in the photographic process. As processes became less expensive and less cumbersome, it also became possible to mass-produce photographic images within newspapers and picture focused magazines.⁴ The File was produced at a point when photography (along with American culture) was shifting. For the FSA, modernization and straight photographic discourse meant the opportunity to imagine photography as a mode of disseminating truthful information. The straight photographic movement was a departure from a strictly art focused understanding of the photographic medium. Although there are images from the File that have been and continue to be celebrated as Art, this does not negate the popular reception of the circulated images as evidentiary documents.

Straight photographers rejected pictorialist methods, including image and negative

³ This time period is debated. Some cite Plato's Cave as the first camera and the beginning of photography. Other theorists argue that photography does not begin with the use of lenses but with the development of chemical processes that fixed the image.

⁴ "Look" and "LIFE" magazine were among the first picture focused magazines to debut in America for popular audiences.

alteration, in favor of new straight methods that centralized the camera as the primary actor in the image making process. Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams among others advocated for this new process in writings that spanned from the turn to the middle of the twentieth century. The specific debate over straight photography has resonance as it spanned the years before, during, and just after the Historical Section's working years (1935-1941).

The straight photographic method centralized the machine/camera in order to achieve objectivity. Thus, the utilization of nothing other than the machine/camera and the science/photographic chemistry became the goal. The ideal method involved the use of both of these elements (camera and chemistry) as "perfectly" as possible in order to record the desired subject truthfully.⁵ Thus, sharpness, long depth of field, full-frames, complete tonal range from black to white, and contact printing (often) were privileged, while painterly methods and the use of multiple negatives to create an image were frowned upon as tasteless. Straight photographers claimed objectivity for two primary reasons. First, they argued objectivity based on the use of the camera to its fullest capacity as a machine. The camera was imagined as a machine which existed, arguably, to render objective images of the world. Second, they argued that utilizing the camera this way removed the role of the infallible human.⁶ Within straight photography, the determination of whether or not the resulting image had "taste" was tied to the successful use of the methods described above to produce a "straight" image.

Straight methodological practice was often defined in opposition to that of previously prevailing pictorialist approaches. Photographer Berenice Abbott argued, "Let us first say what

⁵ Edward Weston, "Seeing Photographically," *The Complete Photographer* 9, no. 49 (1943): 3200–3206. 3203.

⁶ Ibid. 3203.

photography is not. A photograph is not a painting, a poem, a symphony, a dance. It is not just a pretty picture, not an exercise in contortionist techniques and sheer print quality. It is or should be a significant document, which can be described in a very simple term—selectivity.”⁷ Abbott rejected the painterly methods celebrated throughout pictorialism, and considered an effective way to frame photography as art.⁸ Weston also wrote of straight photography as diametrically opposed to pictorialist processes. He condemned pictorial photography as “against the nature” of photography.⁹

Even if produced with the finest photographic technique, the work of the photo-painters could not have been successful. Photography is basically too honest a medium for recording superficial aspects of a subject. It searches out the actor behind the make-up and exposes the contrived, the trivial, the artificial, for what they really are...it provides the photographer with a means of looking deeply into the nature of things, and presenting his subjects in terms of their basic reality.¹⁰

Weston used “photo-painter” to describe those who employed pictorialist methods, thus setting the pictorialist outside of the category “photographer.” Weston addressed straight photography as a reflection of reality, as rooted beyond aesthetic preference, and as based in the nature of the medium. Because straight photography was a method for utilizing the camera’s “innate honesty,” by implication, that which was not straight photography, like pictorialism, strayed from the truth or worse, was dishonest.

While establishing what photography was not, photographic writings were also establishing criteria for the new method. The argument claimed a set of standards by which photography must be practiced in order to avoid betraying the medium’s true nature. Strand

⁷ Berenice Abbott, “Photography at the Crossroads,” *Universal Photo Almanac*, 1951, 42–47. 45.

⁸ Examples of pictorialist methods include painting on or etching prints or negatives and the use of multiple negatives to produce a single print.

⁹ Weston, “Seeing Photographically.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 3205.

delineated between appropriate versus inappropriate straight photographic aesthetics of line and form with focus on the centrality of the machine (the camera) in use at its fullest capacity. He critiqued the pictorialist method arguing, “imbecile use of soft focus or uncorrected lenses destroys entirely the very elements which distinguish photography.”¹¹ Like Weston, Strand referenced the elements of photography alluding again to photography’s possession of a natural predisposition, a nature released by the straight photographic approach, and obfuscated by alternate methods.

Strand cited Stieglitz’s modern portrait work as a model that other photographers could work to emulate: “the achievements possible to the camera pass out of the realm of theory and become objective realities in which certain affirmations emerge...[it] achieves as pure a synthesis of objectivity as can be found in any medium.”¹² Within this excerpt, Strand applied the moral as it pertained to the method. “Pure” alludes to that which is clean, chaste, guilt free—providing a discursive connection between that which is deemed pure photography and an act of moral righteousness. The interplay of religious and scientific language reflects the modernist turn in the US. As straight photography was developing, science was advancing beyond religion as the primary source of knowledge. Progress was imagined as that which was connected to science and technology. The purity of the photographic method in its moral state then is, not surprisingly, a method that purported scientific ways of knowing rather than religious traditions. The achievement of objectivity in this context was valued as both morally and scientifically ideal.

Strand and Weston defined photography as possessing an innate nature, and this is representative of the moralistic rhetoric used to argue for the truth-value of straight photography.

¹¹ Paul Strand, “Photography and the New God,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*. Ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT.: Leete’s Island Books, 1980). 256.

¹² Ibid. 253.

Straight photography developed with specific methodological limits that were discursively tied to concepts of progress through the achievement of objective vision. As a method, straight photography claimed to achieve objectivity: an accurate and precise representation of reality. For Strand, photography represented “a new method of perceiving the life of objectivity and of recording it.”¹³ The maintenance of the photograph’s nature was dependent on the photographer’s success in shooting “straight.”

In 1935, Rexford Tugwell, Director of Economics at Columbia University, was appointed to oversee the New Deal’s Resettlement Administration (RA).¹⁴ At the time of his appointment, Tugwell was familiar with a young economist at Columbia University, Roy Stryker, who had a talent for teaching and a growing commitment to the use of visuals as pedagogy. At the time of Tugwell’s appointment, Stryker was a graduate student instructor at Columbia. His class had grown in popularity as word spread about his field trips into New York City.

STRYKER: I’m sure this was all part of my direction and my formation-where I was headed. It wasn’t long before I was so taken with Professor Coss’ idea of taking me on a tour that I said, “Hey, why don’t you guys [his students at Columbia] first go down on the lower East Side?” One wealthy kid said, “You know, it’s funny I’ve lived around here all my life and have never been down to the Bowery in my life.” So I found myself taking trips, taking these groups down.¹⁵

He was also inspired by Tugwell, whom Stryker described as “basically a descriptive economist.” Stryker remembered, “So often he said in his classes, ‘how can you talk about the economic system if you don’t know what a bank looks like? How can you do this if you haven’t some idea of what-how to describe this institution; not how it works, but principally you have to know what it looks like? You ought to know what the horse looks like before you dissect it later

¹³ Ibid. 257.

¹⁴ Established on April 30, 1935 and described in detail within Chapter 1.

¹⁵ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker, interview by Richard Doud, Interview Transcript, 1965 1963, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

on, because it doesn't look like a caterpillar.'"¹⁶ Stryker strongly believed that facilitating new ways of seeing the world was a most effective teaching method. He practiced this belief by literally showing evidence of marginalized economic and social issues. In July 1935, Tugwell asked Stryker to illustrate the book, *American Economic Life*. The textbook was developed to provide evidence of the changing economic landscape throughout both rural and urban American space. Stryker selected a combination of charts, graphs, illustrations, and photographs to visually strengthen Tugwell's written content. Stryker also selected many photographs by Lewis Hine whose career was defined by socially conscious documentary works. In a 1965 interview with Richard K. Doud, Stryker acknowledged that Hines greatly influenced his own photographic approach.¹⁷ Within the same interview, Stryker described his relationship with Tugwell,

STRYKER: My work at Columbia was very heavily involved in the visual. I had illustrated a book for Mr. Tugwell, I used photographs in my classes, and of course we must never forget that Tugwell was basically and primarily a descriptive economist, as well as a very good theoretical economist. But his introductory approach to economics was what you might call a descriptive approach. And I was a product of that.¹⁸

Tugwell and Stryker's relationship centered on their shared economic expertise and their commitment to use the visual as pedagogy. In a separate Doud interview, Tugwell recounts his impression of Stryker as a student.

TUGWELL: We had worked together in a number of ways; not only was he teaching, but we had written a textbook together, he and Thomas Monro and myself....He [Stryker] did the illustrations....He had done such a notable job in this textbook that it was the first economic text that we knew of that had ever been illustrated. It was so good, and had taken hold so well, that when I went to Washington and conceived of the necessity for making some record of this and using these pictures to convince people that what we were doing needed doing, I sent for Roy.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Oral history interview with Rexford Tugwell, interview by Richard Doud, Interview Transcript, 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

These early moments in Stryker's career showcased an aptitude for using photography to interpret cultural space and foreshadowed the direction he would eventually take as Chief of the Historical Section. The enthusiasm that surrounded Stryker's use of visual material is illustrated by the reaction of his students, Tugwell, and the textbook's reception.

In June of 1935, Tugwell handpicked Stryker and appointed him Chief of the Historical Section within the Resettlement Administration's Division of Information.²⁰ Stryker accepted the position and withdrew from the graduate program at Columbia. Here, Stryker recounted his memory of the appointment and related duties.

STRYKER: My job was to collect documents and materials that might have some bearing, later, on the history of the Farm Security Administration. I don't want to say that photography wasn't conceived and thought of by Mr. Tugwell, So, again, let me say that Tugwell, in giving me his instructions on what he thought I ought to do, did include and did recognize that photography was going to be a part of it. Which was interesting, in a way, because if you read the job description—as I think I'll go and get it and re-read it - there's very little emphasis in that on the role of photography or that there were going to be a photographic unit.²¹

According to Stryker, photography was not presented as the central focus or as a foregone direction of the office. The goal was to show the environmental, economic, and social devastation in rural America as it related to Farm Security Administration programs. Stryker's official job description required him to "plan, execute, and advise with regard to informational material in the form of charts, graphs, and other pictorial and visual media, relating to the programs and activities of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA); to make necessary investigation in obtaining analyzing, and selecting suitable material for preparation in

²⁰ The RA is renamed Farm Security Administration in 1937 and placed under the Department of Agriculture.

²¹ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker.

such forms.”²² Although “visual media” is mentioned in the description, it does not necessarily forecast the extensive File and archive of photographs that Stryker later developed.

As an economist, Stryker’s appointment might have easily translated into depictions of quantitative data related to rural poverty and rehabilitation, focusing on graphs and charts (both mediums mentioned within the job description). Considered together, Stryker’s academic training and his job description do not suggest a focus on photographs as the obvious direction. However, Stryker’s decision to focus on photographic evidence reflected his awareness of the medium’s growing cultural capital with the news consuming public. His approach is also contextualized by dominant photographic discourses that imparted new meaning upon photographs. Stryker’s focus on visual images was foregrounded by his pedagogical approach at Columbia where he took students into blighted sections of New York City to see the everyday impact of poverty and inequality. At the FSA, he could not bring all of urban and middle class America on a field trip into the rural American landscape; as an alternative, using photography he could bring the rural landscape to them. The Historical Section’s emphasis on almost exclusively making photographs in lieu of charts or statistics points to the power of photography as a medium of objective mechanized image production, a status previously reserved for quantitative materials.

Creating the File: Why Photographs?

The way we see/understand photographs is not a universal, historically static process. Photographic vision (or how we see/understand photographs) changes as culture changes. Within

²² Stryker, Horvath, and University of Louisville, *Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972*. Personnel Recommendation for Stryker’s Position dated May 31, 1934. The position is for Assistant Specialist of Information, on July 1, 1935 this position is retitled Chief of the Historical Section in the Division of Information of the Resettlement Administration

the following section, I consider the role of straight photographic ways of seeing for those developing the Historical Section and the popular audience for circulated FSA images. When referring to straight photographic ways of seeing, I refer to seeing or reading photographic images as documents that reflect an objective reality. This way of seeing, I argue, is neither natural nor a foregone conclusion. Photographic vision is a construct. Illustrating its construction within the historical moment facilitates a further consideration of the File.

Stryker left Columbia for Washington D.C. in the midst of the straight photographic movement. He was not necessarily clear about his job, but he knew one thing, “I didn’t know for sure what my job was, except to collect the documents.”²³ Tugwell asked Stryker to “collect documents” and Stryker developed the Historical Section into a project focused on collecting and showing photographs as documents of the American landscape. The result is a photographic archive of 170,000 negatives of which 77,000 prints were printed and added to the official File held by the Library of Congress.²⁴ It was and remains the largest federally funded photographic project in American history.²⁵ Stryker’s approach reflects the photographic moment in which he was working, a moment when straight photographs were popularly imagined as objective representations of the world.

Beyond the office walls, FSA photographs were circulated to audiences of national and regional newspapers, magazines, regional FSA office documents, and materials for other government bureaus and political spaces. The images were used for publications like the 1937 *Farm Tenancy Report*. The report was prepared by the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy;

²³ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker.

²⁴ “Prints & Photographs Reading Room | Prints & Photographs Division - Library of Congress,” webpage, accessed July 2, 2014, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

it included a synopsis and details of the problems caused by widespread tenancy, including economic insecurity and soil erosion, and proposed action, including rehabilitation programming. The report included statistics and analysis; it also included nine RA photographs. The report provided a rationale for establishing the FSA. The decision to provide photographs as part of the report's evidence reflects the acceptance of photographs as documents that are objective and true.²⁶ The FSA photographs were able to appear in spaces like the *Farm Tenancy Report* because they were read not as art or subjective interpretations of a social issue but as fact.

Stryker needed the American audience to continue to read photographs this way or the images would no longer be useful to the FSA. Stryker's responses to questions about composition speak to his active investment in maintaining the discourse of objectivity that circulated around the File. When asked about composition, Stryker distanced himself and his photographers from the process thus reinforcing the role of the camera and marginalizing the role of the photographer.

DOUD: Did you have certain things that a photograph must say? Were there certain problems of composition that must be solved? Or certain artistic effects that must be achieved?

STRYKER: The word "composition" was never talked about, never mentioned. It was a taboo word. We didn't talk about composition. I don't like the word. I think it's been loaded with all sorts of very spurious things....No. We had none of this. Photographers were intelligent people that worked for us. They were communicating.²⁷

Stryker's response to Doud has an air of defense about it. He rejects the term "composition" very strongly, reflecting the weight the term carried as a trait of non-straight methods. Composition implied an active subject/photographer who would select, for the purposes of aesthetics or

²⁶ Special Committee on Farm Tenancy, "Farm Tenancy: Report of the President's Committee," National Resources Committee (Washington: United States Government, February 1937).

²⁷ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker.

message, what would be included and excluded from the photographic frame. It also implied artistic intent. Stryker strictly distanced FSA photographers from implications of subjectivity or artistic intent in order to maintain the images as useful, objective documents. Implying that the images were composed suggested that they were not produced through straight photographic methods. Stryker expanded his answer to Doud, inferring that his understanding of composition is that it indicates content criteria. “I think that’s the important thing. At no time did we have rules or criteria in the sense that are inferred in your question.”²⁸ By rejecting the term composition, Stryker implied that the photographers were not sent into the field to photograph specific content in order to fulfill the office’s political and diplomatic goals. Instead, Stryker’s comment implied that the images drove the goals of the administration. To provide further evidence that FSA images were not “composed,” Stryker discussed the shooting approaches of two staff photographers: Ben Shahn and Walker Evans. Instead of images that were composed or content that was sought out, Stryker described a process that organically resulted from the camera’s presence in the right places at the right times.

STRYKER: Ben Shahn is there at the moment, he helps, perhaps, to set up some by his conversation, but he sees the faces, he sees the juxtaposition of faces; a second later it’s too late. He had to hit it right. Some of that is accident, but he knows what he’s after, he sees—you see, he sees a whole concept there. Walker walks around and all of a sudden sees....It’s an interesting picture, because you know that he planned it. That’s not “composed” in the sense that that word is so badly used at times, but he hunts till he finds the right viewpoint, the right place to stand.²⁹

Stryker’s description of both Shahn and Evans’ approach include references to their ability to see the right moment to make an image. After stating this, Stryker immediately clarified that “hunt[ing] till he [the photographer] finds the right viewpoint, the right place to stand” is not the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

same as “composing.” In fact, viewpoint and perspective are part of the composition process but by separating these actions from the taboo term *composition* (which would, for some, imply fabrication, deception, and photographic failure), Stryker maintained the ability to claim the File as straight and objective. The images, then, were able to continue serving their purpose as social and eventually historical evidence.

With Doud, Tugwell reflects on the File twenty years after its completion. Like Stryker, his statements suggest that the File was successfully understood as straight photography, so much so that reading the images through the lens of straight photographic discourse was naturalized as the only possibility.

DOUD: How successful was the use of the photographs?

TUGWELL: The photographs? This was one thing about this, you could never say anything about a photograph—it was a photograph, it was a picture. This was something that you couldn’t deny. This was evident.

Doud: This was real.

Tugwell: It was real. This was tremendously effective.³⁰

Doud and Tugwell’s assertions that the picture content could not be contested or denied because “it was real” provides a vivid picture of the cultural capital that these pieces held. They were created in a moment when photographic content was read as simply, obviously indisputable.

In a few instances during the active years of the Historical Section, the truth-value of the File was questioned. The most well-known example is the controversy surrounding Arthur Rothstein’s “Skull Head” images. In 1936, while on assignment in South Dakota for the RA covering the drought that had decimated many farmsteads and left the land barren. Rothstein photographed the skull of a cow that had starved and dried out in the hot sun. Symbolically

³⁰ Oral history interview with Rexford Tugwell.

powerful, it illustrated desolation that existed throughout the land. The image was compelling and papers including *The Fargo Forum* and *The Chicago Tribune* printed it. The controversy erupted after the media realized that there was not one but three skull photographs. Moreover, the skull had been physically picked up, moved, and repositioned on different pieces of land. The original frame³¹ shows the skull sitting on what is captioned “overgrazed land”; a cactus, and tufts of grass, and sand cover the landscape around the subject. The second frame,³² based on the order in the caption sheet,³³ is much longer than the typical one-two line caption. Three sentences long and including commentary about the goals of the RA to improve such land suggest that the Washington office staff wrote this caption when they realized that the image would be widely reproduced. The second frame is a wider composition, which includes the skull in the left foreground and the landscape and horizon in the background. When compared to the first image, this second frame more effectively suggests the connection between death (the skull) and the American landscape (the horizon). The media and much of newspaper reading America responded with outrage. Rothstein’s skull images came to represent the possibility that FSA images and the Administration at large were proffering deceit to the American people.

STRYKER: The result was, there was a stampede, everybody take up the thing and damn us for it....In the end, I think they made something more out of it; it wasn’t that important....I don’t think it would ever have had that importance if they hadn’t given it a flurry all through the papers because they wanted to raise hell with the Administration’s being dishonest. ³⁴

³¹ Arthur Rothstein, “Overgrazed Land. Pennington County, South Dakota,” still image, (1936), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998019163/PP/>.

³² Arthur Rothstein, “A Homestead on Submarginal and Overgrazed Land. Pennington County, South Dakota,” still image, (1936), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998019156/PP/resource/>.

³³ “Drought Victim. A bleached skull on this parched, overgrazed land in Pennington South Dakota gives warning that here is a land which the desert threatens to claim. The Resettlement Administration is buying land in this area which will be replanted with hardy grasses and converted into a permanent grazing area.” United States Office of War Information Overseas Picture Division Washington Historical Section, “Written Records,” 1935.

³⁴ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker.

The zealous consumer response to the possibility that the images were produced through careful composition rather than the objective view of the camera suggests that the audience was reading the images as the objective documents that the office was purporting them to be. It appears that the Historical Section, under Stryker's direction, was subscribing to straight photographic discourse; this does not mean that the office was working overtly to maintain the discourse. As an increasingly naturalized way of seeing, overt action was unnecessary. The conception of images as real circulated regardless of the actions of the Historical Section. If the audience were approaching photographs with the assumption that every shot came from a photographer's perspective, the skull pictures would have been consumed as one photographer's interpretation of space during one particular moment in time. Although the "Skull Head" images have been analyzed and reproduced at length, they serve this analysis because of the audience reaction. The fact that a controversy resulted at all suggests that the images were read as documents by the office that was producing them and by the audiences consuming them. Any divergence from this expectation was interpreted as a violation of trust.

Stryker also faced regular criticism of the photographic unit in terms of cost and value. These critiques came in the form of pressure from Washington and from editorials about wasted federal dollars. In many of the letters between Stryker and photographers in the field, he recounted moments of negotiating and justifying the continued existence of the office. One of the central discussions was whether his photographic unit was actually producing useful material or whether it was producing art (connoting subjective views and therefore having less value in this context). One example of Stryker negotiating external critique appeared in a 1938 letter to Lange. Stryker informed Lange that she would be working with Fred Soule, regional information representative to the FSA, on pictures of labor camps and that Soule "expressed nervously if you

[Lange] do ‘arty’ pictures.”³⁵ Stryker negotiated the gray space that straight photography occupied during these years. Field officers like Soule seemed to desire straight photographic works; that is, images that were considered distinct from fine art. Stryker responded to criticism of the office by reinforcing the definition of FSA images as straight photographs and as documents, thus positioning them in distinction from the subjective fine art category.

All Is Situated: Beyond the Image

The first half of this chapter has established that Stryker, the Historical Section generally, and the American public adhered to a vision of photography as straight and objective. Framing the images this way was foundational to making sure they would successfully serve as evidence for the FSA. In the upcoming section, I consider the processes involved in creating the File in order to problematize the construction of FSA images as straight and thus objective. Subjectivity is evident in the structural workings of the Historical Section as photographic content was determined by multiple actors and processes. The FSA image content was driven by preferences of Stryker, FSA photographers, politicians, and the media. Stryker wrote letters, telegrams, and had phone conversations with photographers in the field. During these communications, he would include “shooting scripts” consisting of the scenarios he wanted captured. The scripts varied from formal organized lists to offhand mentions of items he would like the photographers to keep in mind. Many of the directives were the result of requests for images coming from newspapers or government publications.³⁶ The requests read like prompts; for example, “needy families—people evacuating, migrants on the road,” “pictures of children,” or “crowd going to or

³⁵ Stryker, Horvath, and University of Louisville, *Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

coming from church.”³⁷ While the specific subject goals changed over time, from drought to tenancy to migrants, the scripts suggest the construction of poverty through a specific lens in order to garner empathy and support. By showing innocent children or framing the poor as deserving, the bodies took on identities that would be popularly considered worthy of government aid.

Stryker disagreed with the suggestion that he directed the photographers regarding what to shoot. However, his dissent aligns more closely with his need to maintain popular readings of the archive as objective than with the process outlined in his correspondence with FSA field photographers. Based on letters exchanged with FSA photographers and the subsequent images, it is evident that the photographers were sent to specific parts of the country at specific times in order to procure specific content. Moreover, when asked to shoot images of specific details, photographers often sent images/photographs/negatives that reflected these requests. Not only did photographers respond to Stryker’s requests, they also had a say in what was produced and what stories should be pursued. In letters, photographers including Marion Post Wolcott and Dorothea Lange demanded to stay in communities for longer or to move towards certain crop areas.

The communication regarding what and when to shoot is further evidence of the selectivity and positionality of the Historical Section. Once the photographer completed shooting (or had amassed several rolls/sheets), the unprocessed film was sent to the Historical Section and developed.³⁸ Stryker and his staff selected images that would be added to the official file. Those that would not be included in the File were “killed.” In early years, this meant a hole was

³⁷ Historical Section, “Written Records.”

³⁸ In the first few years, the photographers would process their film in the field. In 1937, the Historical Section established a darkroom and hired technicians to process the work.

punched through the image negative. Caption sheets would then be sent from the Historical Section office to the photographer in the field for captioning. Caption sheets also showed those frames that were “killed;”³⁹ these frames often do not have captions but read as “killed” instead. The dominant approach to captions was to try to adhere to the scientific method by providing notes that would appear objective. Based on guidelines written by Paul Vanderbilt, archivist Annette Melville notes “the individual captions...were to be strictly factual and under fifty words in length.”⁴⁰ Lange’s captions for example, “record no names but they do feature socioeconomic categories such as ‘destitute pea pickers’ and ‘mother of seven children.’”⁴¹ After the photographer returned the caption sheet, the images were then printed and mounted, the captions were applied to the photo mounts, and the photographs were officially filed.⁴² These images became part of the official File. FSA photographers were expected to depict reality as scientifically as possible, not only through straight photographic methods but within the text that they submitted as captions. Epistemically, the goal was objectivity. Culturally, the effect was the creation of images that were largely received as documents.

At multiple stages, including the distribution of the shooting script, the selection of subject, the style of the image, the caption, printing, filing, or killing an image, The Historical Section processes influenced the content that would make up the File. The contents of the File were the pool from which FSA images were chosen for publication. As a result of the Office’s process, a small group (77,000 prints from 170,000 negatives) of the images from the archive

³⁹ “Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives - Background and Scope,” 1935, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/background.html>.

⁴⁰ Annette Melville, “Farm Security Administration, Historical Section: A Guide to Textual Records in the Library of Congress” (Washington: Library of Congress, 1985). 13n7.

⁴¹ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2007). 53.

⁴² “Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives - Background and Scope.”

serves as a touchstone for popular understandings of rural poverty during the Depression. These images provide material evidence of who was considered American, deserving, and eligible for help during the Depression. At the same time, the images continue to circulate along with their captions. While the images take on a central role in this research, the captions, which have taken on second lives as titles for reproductions and within the digital archive, provide insight into the way the contents of the frame were understood and “read” at the time of production. I suggest that captions are central to the meanings made by the FSA photographic archive. Understanding the impact of captions on FSA photographs provides further depth for contextualizing the images as framed messages that necessarily exist within a broader cultural space.

Semiotics and visual cultural theory suggest attached captions further limit the meaning of photographs. Because FSA images were circulated within a straight photographic discourse to achieve political goals (gain support for FSA programs), the role of captions is integral to understanding the meaning of the images. Captions are a specific type of text. They are different from headlines, which appear larger and above the image. Captions also differ from articles that provide additional narrative beside the image as accompaniment. Theorist Roland Barthes explains, “headline and article are palpably separate from the image, the former by its emphasis, the latter by its distance....The caption, on the contrary, by its very disposition, by its average measure of reading, appears to duplicate the image, that is, to be included in its denotation.”⁴³ The FSA photographs were presented within a framework of documentation and their meanings were limited further by the application of the “scientifically determined” caption. The claim of objectivity lent credibility to the image and caption as duplicates of each other and of reality. However, as Barthes also explains, duplication is impossible. In contrast to duplication, he

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (London: Macmillan, 1982). 205.

theorizes that captions project new meanings onto the image, meanings that may hide, contradict, or amplify various denoted messages.

Sontag further supports this by explaining that the caption limits the photograph by presenting one interpretation as a full or true duplication; “the caption is the missing voice and it is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached.”⁴⁴ Even though the caption cannot duplicate the meaning presented by the photograph, it is interpreted as doing so. Both Stryker and Tugwell denounced newspaper staff for changing FSA captions. Their anger stemmed from the contention that the FSA captions were the accurate captions and anything else was deceit. Tugwell stated, “The fact is the newspapermen took it [Rothstein’s Skull photograph] and put any caption under it they wanted to.”⁴⁵ In a letter dated November 21, 1936, Stryker wrote to Lange regarding captions, “Since our mix-up over the skull and the abandoned bank building, I am most meticulous now in having a *correct factual caption*. The proper location and town is most essential.”⁴⁶ One week later, in a letter dated December 2, Stryker responded to an inquiry from Lange about providing images to LIFE magazine. He wrote, “Whatever happens regarding the job for LIFE, I think that you definitely should insist that the layout and captions be subject to your approval. I don’t trust that crowd too far in the handling of pictures. They can’t change the picture, but they can certainly raise hell by the type of caption they use.”⁴⁷

Stryker and Doud realized the power of the caption; as apparent duplicate, the caption takes on the role of closure in relation to the meaning embedded in the image. As a form of

⁴⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Macmillan, 2011).

⁴⁵ Oral history interview with Rexford Tugwell.

⁴⁶ Stryker, Horvath, and University of Louisville, *Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972*. Series C. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

closure, the caption becomes a powerful tool for editorializing (beyond the process of image-making and selection). However, contextualized by straight photography and objectivity, Stryker and Doud were not so much compelled by the caption as false duplicate, but by the non-FSA caption as false duplicate. This stance reinforced claim to objectivity regarding image-caption pairs produced by the Historical Section. Notably, and in contrast to Barthes, Sontag states that “the caption-glove slips on and off so easily.”⁴⁸ She suggests that even though the caption acts as a closure, the multiple meanings of the photograph still exist and can be re-established through removal or alteration of the caption. However, in the case of the FSA Photographic File, the captions are securely maintained as organizing tools within the physical File and the LOC-FSA digital archive. The applied captions were and continue to be reproduced with their corresponding photographs. Within the Collection and for most reproduction purposes, the captions serve as titles.

Walter Benjamin, citing Brecht, shows the disconnect that exists between the photographic image (or reproduction) and reality when a picture is made to conform to a mode of fashion or, in the FSA’s case, to editorialize in a specific way. “Since, however, the true face of this photographic creativity is the advertisement or the association, its legitimate counterpart is exposure or construction. For, says Brecht, the situation, is ‘complicated by the fact that less than at any other time does a simple *reproduction of reality* tell us anything about reality.’”⁴⁹ Addressing the drive of creative photography towards eventual commodification, Benjamin’s point is illustrative of the outcomes of photography made for political purposes. The “reproduction of reality” becomes a reflection of the purpose for which it was made rather than

⁴⁸ Sontag, *On Photography*.

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography*, Kindle, 1972. (Kindle Locations 384-386).

as a replica of reality. Inherent in the medium, photographs are always situated in a perspective. Trachtenberg suggests that uncaptioned images imply an author “who keeps out of the reader’s way...but maintains a consistent point of view, a physical and moral perspective.”⁵⁰ Captions further limit meaning, but even in the case of the uncaptioned image, the message is open, but not objective (i.e. not value-free).

According to Barthes, the press photograph, which FSA images were made to potentially become, “is a message formed by a source of emission, a channel of transmission and a point of reception.”⁵¹ In this case the *source of emission* is director Roy Stryker and the FSA photographers *as actors* who selected, composed, and captioned the images. The context in which the “press photo” is placed, the type of publication, the surrounding text, and title are all part of the *channel of transmission*.⁵² All parts of the channel of transmission inform the meaning of the photograph. Finally, the audience, those who read the images for meaning, are the *point of reception*. Similar to Trachtenberg’s point regarding the openness of images, Barthes, from the perspective of semiotics and structuralism, calls photography “a message without a code.”⁵³ As a message without a code, the photographs do not inherently communicate what the audience should interpret from them. The photograph alone may contain open interpretative possibilities, but the level of production and reception are connotative. A closure is introduced to the photographic message as it is structured by ideology, culture, and aesthetics. In terms of the dynamic that exists between the openings and closures surrounding photographic meaning, Trachtenberg explains that “a photograph can arouse widely varying interpretations, and thus,

⁵⁰ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*. 251.

⁵¹ Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*. 194.

⁵² Ibid. 194.

⁵³ Ibid. 197.

unless an editor anchors the image with an unambiguous caption, its meaning is too open and indeterminate to reliably secure a point of view.”⁵⁴ His point is particularly apt when considering the weight that “securing a point of view” can, and did hold for the FSA.

The following case surrounds an FSA image and the captions applied to it; this case highlights the ways captions were understood by the office, media, and popular audience. In June 1937, two letters were sent to field photographer Russell Lee from the Washington office. One was a diplomatically written letter of apology from A. A. Mercey, the Assistant Director of the FSA Division of Information and the other was from Stryker. Both letters were regarding a photograph Lee made of two siblings in Iowa. In the image, the older sister holds the younger sibling in her lap. The Director’s letter explains that Lee’s photograph which he captioned “daughters of John Scott, hired man near Ringgold County, Iowa” was released to the *Des Moines Register* and other papers in May with a new caption written by staff in the Division of Information office. The caption referred to the subjects as “TENANT MADONNA. The sad expression on this young mother’s face tells the whole tragic story of tenantry”⁵⁵ The published caption effectively redefined the relationship between the two people shown in the frame. With Lee’s caption, the subjects are siblings, but with the published caption the older child becomes a “young mother.” Similar to the themes in the 1935 and 1936 Migrant Mother images, the published “Tenant Madonna” caption calls to the audience to help rehabilitate families (presumably like the one shown) who were to symbolize “the whole tragic story of tenantry.” The letter from Mercey explained that the *Register* responded to the altered caption in a later publication in which they reprinted the image and added “that residents of Ringgold County

⁵⁴ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*. 251.

⁵⁵ Stryker, Horvath, and University of Louisville, *Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972*.

believed the error to be a ‘trick’ perpetuated by the photographer.” The Director apologized for the error on behalf of the Washington office as it negatively affected Lee’s reputation, and acknowledged that Lee’s notes always contained “scrupulously accurate and honest” materials. The reaction of the residents of Ringgold County, according to the *Register*, and Mercey’s apology conform to discourses of objectivity. They privilege and expect the FSA photographs (and captions) to be “accurate” and “honest.” A second letter from Stryker to Lee, who at this point Stryker addressed as both field photographer and friend, was a much more direct, and at times an exasperated account of the “Tenant Madonna” scandal. Stryker wrote, “In the future, people using our pictures will accept our factual material or assume full responsibility.... I would suggest that you write the family in Ringgold County, explaining your irritation, disgust, contempt and so on for those people in Washington who have no more respect for the truth than was shown in this case.”⁵⁶

While the “Tenant Madonna” caption was received by the public as inaccurate on account of assigning mother-daughter identities to two sisters, the event opens the discussion of how wrong a caption must be for it to constitute a lie or a fake, and how accurate a caption must be for it to constitute the truth. The line between accurate and inaccurate caption is not always so clear. The response to the “Tenant Madonna” illustrates the Historical Section’s commitment to controlling the interpretation of the Office’s images. Stryker expressed anger at the news media’s failure to understand that the Historical Section was the sole proprietor of accurate captions for FSA images. By contending that the FSA captions were the only possible interpretation, Stryker limited the possible interpretations of the photographs.

The Historical Section was responsible for developing social and political support for

⁵⁶ Ibid.

New Deal programs that would provide sustainable rehabilitation to the rural poor. The Historical Section needed the FSA images to prove the existence of rural poverty; they also had to convince the voting public that those experiencing such poverty were worthy of help. As a result, it seems that there was a particular imperative for Stryker and his office to publish images that would generate the best response in terms of their administrative goals. This set of political imperatives sits in conflict with the office correspondence which frame the images as “documents” and the captions as “scientific”—terms that infer a level of impartiality to the images. However, by claiming that both photograph and caption are “value-free,” the Historical Section reinforces their point of view as the truth. As a result, what would otherwise be interpreted as covertly directing viewers’ readings of photographic content by securing point of view (via captions)—or as propaganda—is transformed into simply facilitating the viewer to see a particular “reality.”

Director Errol Morris argues, “captions do the heavy lifting as far as deception is concerned. The pictures merely provide the window dressing. The unending series of errors engendered by falsely captioned photographs are rarely remarked upon.”⁵⁷ A false caption, to which Morris refers in this case, is one that presents materially inaccurate information in order to mislead the viewer. In light of the material reality of images, limiting discussions of “fakeness” to the contents of the frame is reductive, especially if the goal is to understand how connoted meanings are changed or limited. If every caption closes down the possibilities of photographic meaning, then the focus for critique should not be only on those captions that are overtly lies or empirically incorrect. Focusing on such captions serves as a distraction from the impact that all captions have in framing popular understandings of photographs and, consequently, of the world

⁵⁷ Errol Morris with Hany Farid, “Photography as a Weapon,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2008, accessed April 5, 2014.

they depict.

I propose that critically contextualizing and denaturalizing captions that are not overtly false, but are imbued with credibility as image duplicates, may serve to reopen the possibilities for image meaning making, much in the way that Sontag suggests when she refers to captions as easily removed gloves. The role of the caption as one that Barthes theorizes, “loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, and imagination”⁵⁸ can focus the viewer on a specific issue within the image, but by doing so it limits the interpretation of the image. The caption does not change the image but “we see it differently,”⁵⁹ the meaning changes. Barthes is not suggesting that the meaning of an image is changed because the caption is false, but because the caption is necessarily limited by the standpoint through which it was produced. If captions can be successfully reimagined as limited views that present one perspective, captions will no longer contribute to the image-text pair as objective but will provide a historically, ideologically, and aesthetically specific interpretation. Understanding the caption as limited and positioned might allow the viewer more access to open interpretations of the contents of images.

Deconstructing/Problematizing “The View from Nowhere”

The straight photographic method claims objective images are possible by centralizing the machine/camera. The methodological expectations that were framed as best practices for achieving straight images were dually meant to facilitate access to the full capacity of the machine/camera while also keeping the fallible human/photographer from affecting the process. “The automatism of the photographic process promised images free of human interpretation—

⁵⁸ Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*. 205.

⁵⁹ Morris. “Photography as a Weapon.”

objective images, as they came to be called.”⁶⁰ To challenge this discourse, I consider the role of the photographer/subject as multiple and central, but obscured by straight photography. I do not attempt to problematize straight photography as an aesthetic movement but rather as a visual epistemology which discursively claims objective image production. Additionally, this critique is not of the photographers, necessarily, as individuals work within and reinforce ways of knowing while existing in coherence, conflict, and complication with such systems. Even if the mentioned photographers benefited from the structure of straight photography, they were also at constant risk of being marginalized by it. As such, this research considers how the FSA photographic archive subscribes to hegemonic ways of knowing that lead to restricted ways of seeing; the photographers and their works provide evidence of these epistemologies in practice. Claiming objectivity facilitated certain readings of images as “value-free,” a state that Alan Trachtenberg argues is impossible.⁶¹ In the following section, I consider the FSA images’ role in perpetuating straight photographic discourses of objectivity, and how this claim of shooting straight facilitated the cultural reception of the works as documents of truth rather than limited views.

Centralizing the capacity of the machine presents the photographic process as one that is mechanized, reproducible, and infallible. The lack of subjectivity attributed to the process is a ruse that successfully hides the active role of the photographer subject in selecting the camera, lens, film, paper, angle at which to shoot, and the subject (who may or may not be posed but is nonetheless selected). The photographer as subject is also allowed the choice in the darkroom in terms of paper, chemistry, burning, dodging, and contrast adjustment—all of which affect the final appearance of the photograph. The presumption of the straight photographic community

⁶⁰ Lorraine J. Daston and Peter Louis Galison, *Objectivity* (Massachusetts: Zone Books, 2010).131.

⁶¹ Alan Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays on Photography* (Leetes Island Books, 1980).

was that all choices made in the image making were based on increasing the amount of reality rendered by the image. Some forms of photography may involve the photographer in more ways (denoting choices) than others, but all photography requires a series of choices made by the photographer—making complete objectivity impossible.

The 1936 Migrant Mother is an example of straight photography that has been celebrated and widely reproduced since its creation. It has taken on a life as an icon of American strength and perseverance. By analyzing the 1936 Migrant Mother and the related frames from the same day,⁶² I argue that straight photography's claim of objectivity is not only impossible but it also minimizes the role of the photographer as active subject in photographic production. Within the frame, four subjects are included: the mother who looks into the distance holding a worried hand to her face, her two young children who hide their faces in her shoulders, and her infant whose profile is visible in the bottom right of the frame. The background is a neutral cloth provided by the tent in which they sit. All are clothed in worn garments that fit loosely on their thin bodies. The tight composition of the huddled family has left decades of viewers imagining that through this woman a direct view has been provided into the perseverance of rural families during the Depression. As is the role of the icon, the 1936 Migrant Mother has become the lens, whether directly or indirectly, through which the dominant historical narrative of the Depression is framed. This would not be the case if not for her discursive construction as a document.

In spite of normalized photographic vision suggesting the contrary, the photographic image is not a machine-automated reflection of some objective reality. Reviewing the digitized negatives from Dorothea Lange's time with the migrant family discussed above allows for an

⁶² "Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother' Photographs in the Farm Security Administration Collection: An Overview," *Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division*, 2004, http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html. Lange made six exposures of Henderson and her family. She began with wide shots, far from the subjects. She made closer images of the family over the course of the time photographing them.

analysis of her photographic process on that day. Lange's first frame is a wide composition; she included the entire tent and a view of the environment beyond. It is likely that these were meant to build rapport and comfort with the subjects rather than to capture an aesthetically effective image. Her later exposures are closer; one is a portrait of the mother breastfeeding her infant, and in another the mother looks over her left shoulder while one of the children makes eye contact with the viewer. Of the exposures, the one that became the icon has the tightest framing; it gives the viewer a sense that this family is trapped both literally and figuratively in their circumstance. The main figure remains that of a mother, a maternal character imagined protecting her family against the challenges of rural poverty. Moreover, the lack of visible faces allows the children's bodies to take on the identity of universally salient beings. This image was selected for its emotionally powerful elements and for its carefully constructed composition. The 1936 Migrant Mother presents a conversation about the land they travel, the drought, and the state of farming as a cause of strife. The later frames, which also focus on the mother and motherhood, do so with anecdotal specificity. For example, showing the mother breastfeeding steers the focus towards the role of mothers as those who must nourish and sustain rather than about mother as caregiver generally. There are other stories told by the other frames; and together as a series the images present a new and varied conversation, but the now-icon is the one that was selected to tell the true story of this family.

Lange constructed the image by choosing this particular individual or group as the subject of focus. She also selected the perspective and distance from which to make the picture. Beyond the subject of 1936 Migrant Mother, Lange also made choices that determined the tone and contrast of the print. Accomplishing a full tonal range can be the result of multiple methods including exposure time, developing time, dodging, and burning. These results are carefully

calculated for aesthetic value yet are rarely if ever a reflection of nature.⁶³ While straight photographers considered all of these methods acceptable for achieving full tonal range, this contradicts the claim of objective reality. The tonal range is an aesthetic choice based on constructions of what is appealing rather than based on natural reality. Fraprie also notes that black and white in itself is an abstraction; “it does not reproduce all the facts; and this departure from the truth...makes the endeavor to produce truth by pure photography as impossible as the endeavor to produce truth by manipulation of any nature.”⁶⁴ Through different sets of choices at different points in the photographic process, Dorothea Lange’s process is representative of the subjective identities and knowledges each FSA photographer imparted upon his or her artistic products. The process each used was just as far from photographic objectivity as the process of any other photographic movement. Conversely, we might say that alternative photographic processes and methods come just as close to the truth as those of straight photography. The reality that all photography is subjectively produced as a result of the humans involved in the process opens the possibility for a new discourse that will provide a new way of seeing images. For the File, this opening means complicating the truth-value imparted upon the few heavily circulated images.

God’s Eye View: Closures upon Meaning Making

Finally, I consider the implications of maintaining objectivity as a dominant discourse that guides photographic vision by applying Donna Haraway’s theoretical work regarding “the view from nowhere.” I argue that the maintenance of such a framework reinforces Western,

⁶³ Frank Roy Fraprie, “Our Illustrations,” in *The American Annual of Photography*, vol. 58 (London: American Photographic Publishing, 1944). 171.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 173.

hegemonic structures of power, and alternatively, I propose counter hegemonic ways of seeing as more likely to produce a photographic culture built on egalitarianism.

The Historical Section, and more broadly the FSA, benefited from the naturalization of the objective claim. FSA photographs were read as documents and depictions of truth. Problematically, the privilege that came with having certain images read as “real” or “true” results in a false binary with all other images. Anything read as not straight photography was deemed to be “unreal” or “false.” Those images and ways of seeing that did not align with straight photography were marginalized for lack of value, lack of truth, or for straying from the nature of photography. The claim of objectivity, in general, is a powerful cultural tool for structuring privilege. Donna Haraway’s theoretical work focuses on the role of objectivity within the scientific community, but I find her framework a pertinent one to use in application to the photographic ways of seeing. In Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” she addresses knowledge as constructed in the context of science, where knowledge is often touted as real or absolute. This discussion of what is real and what is accepted as rational is a “struggle over how to see.”⁶⁵ Accordingly, the eyes and vision are central to Haraway’s work. Haraway acknowledges that vision and discourses about vision are culturally constructed. Oppression and privilege are born out of constructions of vision; specifically, oppression is produced through disembodied vision and all-seeing standpoint.⁶⁶ Philosopher Thomas Nagel explains that the term objective implies a kind of rigor or neutral omniscience that he describes as the “view from nowhere.” This type of positionality in research (or photography) results in what Haraway terms the impossible “view

⁶⁵ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, 1988, 575–99. 372.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 374.

from above” or the “god trick.”⁶⁷ Haraway determines that the god trick avoids accountability in its claim of objectivity. It avoids the identification of situated, partial positionality. The many choices of the photographer and the Historical Section that went into creating the “Migrant Mother” illustrate the varying but unavoidable subjectivity that is part of making photographs—whether pictorial or straight. The straight photographic movement’s claim of objectivity is only accomplished through obscuring these choices and processes, resulting effectively in the “god trick.”

Photographers, no matter how talented, are not gods. Claiming such disembodied positions empowers the “god” as a producer of the “real” while marginalizing the “human” as producer of the “unreal.” As an alternative, Haraway theorizes the value of situated knowledges. She argues for recognizing and privileging partial perspectives that are connected to eyes and vision that are embodied, situated, and accountable. Because vision is multidimensional, the goal is for partial selves/positions as opposed to claiming total, essentialized positions.⁶⁸ This way of understanding seeing serves to effectively deconstruct and dismantle the privilege previously imparted upon the impossible view from nowhere. Systems of oppression are held accountable and made visible by rooted subjectivities that provide “a more adequate, richer, better account of a world...in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others’ practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions.”⁶⁹ Where there was once a privileged class of images based on an objective claim that has proven false, there can now be a proliferation of images privileged for their situated subjective perspectives. Privileging situated views is preferable as it denaturalizes hegemonic identities by decentering them.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 376.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 375.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 372.

Hegemonic views are no longer centered as objective or more true than views that come from the margins.

I began this inquiry with the initial finding: the icon, the 1936 Migrant Mother, was not the only one; the 1935 Migrant Mother was made by Lange prior to the icon. The 1936 Migrant Mother, like most iconic photographs, was read and continues to be conceived as a straight photograph tied to discourses of objectivity. Not only do icons like this one become true, they also become the whole story. The element of surprise expressed by those to whom I have since shown the 1935 Migrant Mother suggests that the 1936 Migrant Mother was functionally taking up the whole frame. As an icon, she came to symbolize poverty, motherhood, American citizen, rural migrant; she made these categories visible and conceivable within the national imaginary. Problematically, the image, as icon, made these categories visible within a discourse of objectivity, effectively hiding those other women, like the 1935 Migrant Mother, who were left outside of the frame. The impact of the icon exemplifies the impact of “the god trick” within straight photography; by claiming to have no bias or position, the content of the frame becomes the only truth. Alternatively, if icons like Lange’s 1936 Migrant Mother were re/seen as momentary visions, compositions, perspectives, then it would become possible to ask why and how one moment, identity, or experience, was deemed worth placing in a frame, and another was marginalized as less valuable.

Taking up Haraway’s proposal for situated perspectives could allow for re/seeing the FSA/OWI Photograph Collection. By taking up a conscious, critical eye, images are given the opportunity to take up new space as positioned. Situating the perspectives of the FSA photographs does not weaken them. Rather, it complicates them. It allows the viewer to ask new questions, previously impossible questions. The photographs could be newly read as an object

born out of a positioned, grounded subjectivity. Every view, except for that which originates from nowhere, is acknowledged as situated, produced from a partial and original position. Every image is both real and partial but this partiality does not make it less real. The process of reading an image for its ability to convey reality becomes irrelevant. Instead, photographic vision is conscious and critical and the process of reading the image allows the audience to see aesthetically straight photographs as expression rather than a document.

Haraway concludes that the view from nowhere privileges Western, patriarchal epistemologies.⁷⁰ It can be inferred that all forms of structural inequality stand to benefit from the maintenance of this ideology. Analyzing all photography as partial and positioned would not only remove the social preoccupation with the real versus the fake in terms of image and caption, but it would also complicate the content of all images by presenting new questions like “who took this image,” “why were they in this place,” “how do they know their subject,” “what went into the decision that led to this image,” “what was excluded,” and “what does this tell us about the experience of the photographer/subject and about the experience of those things or people within the image itself.” Rather than centralizing the machine, these are questions that centralize the human experience and also allow for a richer consideration of the role of the photographer, editors, and audience in relation to subjects, content, and culture. These are also questions that free viewers from a constricting pattern of seeing in favor of more egalitarian vision.

Straight photography is a product of the social and cultural context from which it developed. It is not the method of straight photography that needs reconsideration; instead, it is straight photography’s claim of objectivity that is both impossible and problematic. The discourse surrounding objectivity has produced a way of seeing which obscures the role of the

⁷⁰ Ibid.

photographer's subjective position in producing all images and marginalizes the content of photographs when they are read as non-objective. The discourse of objectivity presents a false dichotomy that is based on an impossible god's eye view. By applying Donna Haraway's theoretical work on partial positionality and science to straight photography and FSA captions, we are able to imagine a new way of seeing the File. As Fraprie wrote, "If a man wishes to reproduce all the facts, he cannot do it absolutely. If he wishes to reproduce beauty, he can undoubtedly come within measurable distance of his ideal on occasion."⁷¹ The privileging of partial and grounded subjectivities scripts a way of seeing with a central focus on the subject/photographer's production as originating from a space where "beauty" is also based on position.

Conclusion

This chapter works from Trachtenberg's assertion that photography must be considered from the context in which it was made. By considering the FSA photographs as adhering to straight documentary methods, I suggest the Historical Section, under the direction of Roy Stryker, reinforced and benefitted from the discursive connection between the images and straight photography's claim to objectivity. I also find the photographic audience, including FSA field office workers, urban American citizens, and political figures, subscribed to straight photographic ways of seeing. Together the production and consumption of FSA photographs in concert with the dominant discursive construction of photographic vision produced a body of work that was read as evidence of who and what existed in American rural space during the Depression. If not for the construction of photographs as objective, the Historical Section would

⁷¹ Fraprie, "Our Illustrations." 173.

not have been able to use photography to serve its purposes; that is, to provide evidence and garner political and social support for FSA programs. The discourse proved effective.

While effective, the claim to objectivity was also false and problematic. There were multiple people and politics involved in the development of what would eventually become the FSA/OWI Photograph Collection. Historical Section photographers were directed regarding who and how to represent rural poverty, both visually and through captions. The File, which consists of the photographs paired with captions, reflects the space, culturally and politically, in which the images were made. When this multiplicity of construction processes is considered as it intersects with the public reception of the images as documents of truth and as “introducing America to Americans”⁷² (as Stryker purported the File to be), it becomes evident that the power of the archive goes beyond artistic significance and in fact serves as a tool for understanding what types of bodies were framed (photographically and rhetorically) as American and as possible for rehabilitation out of poverty. If straight photographs are imagined as value-free and truth-laden documents, then questions about politics, exclusion, and epistemic violence through documentary image are impossible. However, by separating straight photographic aesthetics from the claim of objectivity we can engage with straight photographic content with a conscious, critical eye. This analysis attempts to provide evidence of the need to work towards filling this interpretive gap.

Through the claim to objectivity, FSA images came to represent those who were rural, American, and deserving of help out of poverty. The contents of the images became the whole, true story. In the FSA’s case, the frame purported to depict those who were in need of help out of poverty, and with such depictions comes the impossibility of alternatives. The contents of the

⁷² Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy C. Wood, *In This Proud Land: America, 1935-1943, as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975). 8

frame were rendered as the truth while that which existed beyond the frame became visually and conceptually impossible. The frame was defined by the image-text as factual pair rather than as open for interpretation and multiple meanings. Such a limited view allowed for the exclusion of racially marginalized populations to go unnoticed and unquestioned. And as they were excluded from view, either because they were never photographed or their images were not circulated, they were discursively removed from the landscape. Discursive removal made it impossible to access social categories that have been defined by the frame. In this case, those who are not visualized as American, rural, and deserving poor were excluded from claiming these identities and from being imagined as existing.

Chapters 3 and 4 are framed by the photographic context that I have presented here. By complicating the “truth” of the images while also realizing that the photographs were and are popularly read as “truth,” it becomes possible and imperative to ask who was represented in the archive, how were they depicted, and what was the impact of marginalizing some populations for the sake of helping others. Grounding my analysis in conscious, critical readings of FSA images, chapter 3 follows the trajectory of the 1936 Migrant Mother by analyzing that which was popularly circulated. Interested in the content that was presented “within the frame” chapter 3 asks how and why certain images were selected for circulation from the File. Specifically, how were mothers and motherhood represented within these circulated images? While chapter 3 is an interrogation of that which was included within the overarching frame of FSA photographic representation, chapter 4 follows the trajectory of the 1935 Migrant Mother by analyzing that which was excluded and left beyond the frame. The chapter analyzes images in order to answer whether mothers read as Mexican in the US were photographed and how these representations compare to the circulated images. The chapter considers the historical and cultural context in

which Mexicans in the US faced increasingly hostile nativism and the dissemination of a racializing rhetoric which had specifically gendered components. By grounding these chapters in the historical moment in terms of photographic methods and dominant discourse, I hope to better understand how the archive was conceived and the weight of producing a body of images that would define a Nation.

CHAPTER 3. WITHIN THE FRAME: CONSTRUCTING FSA CLIENTS

During the Depression, FSA images were reproduced for campaign posters, government publications, mainstream news, art exhibits, and social welfare purposes. Media requests for images were selected from the 77,000 prints that Stryker included in the official File. Many of these requests were done hastily and at times images were chosen based on popularity and past success. Grace Tugwell, wife of Rexford Tugwell and assistant to Stryker, remembers:

G. TUGWELL: There was a tendency to use the same pictures over and over again. The newspapermen would come in and they were always in such a hurry. They would not run through the thing. They would say, "Where is that picture of the cow skeleton?" That is why that became such a symbol, because all the newspapers used it, because they were too lazy to go through the portfolio, and that was striking. We had many other striking ones.¹

Today the landing page for the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Digital Archive website² highlights one of the photographs that was used, in the words of Tugwell, "over and over again." The page contains mostly small text with a photographic banner stretching across the top. The banner is a segment of Dorothea Lange's 1936 Migrant Mother (fig. 1.2). This image is the most reproduced from the entirety of the Photographic File.

It is also one of the most famous photographs in US History. Rhetoricians Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites highlight the "Migrant Mother" as an icon and account for the extensive and varied circulation the image has had since it was made. Sally Stein writes, "Within a few years, the FSA office used this photograph on an in-house poster to proclaim the multiple uses its growing file of government pictures served...in major newspapers and magazines, along

¹ Oral history interview with Rexford Tugwell.

² "Prints & Photographs Reading Room | Prints & Photographs Division - Library of Congress."
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/>

with photography periodicals and museum exhibitions.”³ What is marked about the immediate and repeated use of this image is that Lange made similar images earlier during her tenure with the RA/FSA and these images remained in obscurity. In June 1935, a year before the icon, Lange made a similar photograph (fig.1.1). Lange paired it with the caption: “Mexican mother in California. “Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me ‘We don’t want to go, we belong here.’” (Note on Mexican labor situation in repatriation.)” The similarity between these images in aesthetics, emotion, subject, perspective, and pose is evident. Their similarities make their contrasting destinies (forgotten versus iconic) stand out in sharp relief.

Hariman and Lucaites caution against the over-ritualizing of iconographic images. In this case, the FSA produced an image that was widely and popularly circulated as a New Deal Madonna. Hariman and Lucaites argue that photojournalism, which is the mode of production for iconic images, is an ideological practice. Photographs then are “mute records of social performance” that activate tacit identities.⁴ Amplified by straight photographic discourse, photographs were popularly read as objective representations of the world. As a producer of cultural truth, the iconic image constitutes individuals as citizens connected to collective identity and community. Due to its authoritative gaze and limited representation of events, the icon tends toward the reinforcement of dominant totalizing narratives. Hariman and Lucaites provide an effective framework for considering how public identity is defined via visual practice. While their focus is on the ability to mobilize social critique through image-texts, this chapter considers

³ Sally Stein, “Passing Likeness: Dorothea Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother’ and the Paradox of Iconicity,” *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, 2003, 345–55. 346.

⁴ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).23.

how circulated FSA photographs mobilized public memory and reinforced normative national identities.

Dorothea Lange's 1936 *Migrant Mother* held many meanings for Historical Section. It meant wide circulation, popular consumption, and credibility for the office. But the image, as Lange made it, was not born the "Migrant Mother." As noted in chapter one, the photograph originally held the caption, "Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California." This caption has since disappeared in favor of the title, "Migrant Mother." Titles beyond captions are a characteristic that few FSA images possess. The application of the title, "Migrant Mother," in lieu of the longer caption gives the image-text pair mobility and timelessness that is less likely for the image when it is paired with its more specific caption details. These details root the image in the time and space where it was made while the title allows a broader range of possibilities to be applied to the subject. As the "Migrant Mother," the woman in the image no longer has an age, a location, or a period in time; she becomes more capable of representing mothers, children, and struggling families anywhere. I plan to argue that the mobility and easy appropriation of the 1936 *Migrant Mother* as icon of American identity comes from the sloughing of the image caption and from the application, or assumption of her whiteness. The exclusion of racial markers then becomes of great interest to this study. Was whiteness connoted via the absence of racializing terms within captions? If so, does this absence of identification have any impact on image selection and circulation?

Although the photographs were created within a cultural framework that defined them as objective documents, the overarching claim that the Historical Section was providing a visual survey of rural poverty in America conflicts with distinct processes of selection that determined what was ultimately circulated. The archive is more complex than the collection of frames taken

by photographers. That collection of frames, 170,000, is in itself limited in view. Moreover, Stryker selected only forty-five percent of those frames for inclusion in the official File. Those selected were printed and mounted on cards with corresponding captions and became the pool from which images were selected for circulation. Although the selection of which images to circulate could have been merely based on aesthetics, it appears that racializing processes were also at work. The selection process was not solely the work of Roy Stryker but was the result of multiple interests, including those of the media, government, RA/FSA regional offices, and the public. In the end, the 1936 Migrant Mother and 1935 Migrant Mother took contrasting trajectories—one became iconic and the other is barely known. This is indicative of a broader racialized process of selection and circulation. These processes rendered a broad study of the US, the landscape and its citizens, from 170,000 frames down to the few “representative” frames.

Visual Depictions of Nationalist Imaginaries

As discussed in chapter 2, Stryker’s decision to use photography as the primary medium by which the Historical Section would collect and circulate evidence of rural poverty in the United States was emboldened by the straight photographic movement which naturalized the photographic images as objective depictions of reality. In this context, the photographic unit amassed a large body of images of rural America and Americans. Marion Post Wolcott spoke to Doud regarding her relationship to Stryker’s vision of the project, “I did enjoy at that time also photographing the good land, and the lush land, and I thought that it had a place in Roy’s complete documentation of America and all sides of it.” She is one of many to recount the project as one would, as Stryker said, serve in “introducing America to Americans.”⁵ Public

⁵ Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*. 8.

histories of the project and the personal recollections of those directly involved with the photographic unit suggest that these images, in terms of themes and identities, were imagined as representative of the state of the Nation and its citizens during the Depression. Following this logic, those themes and identities that were not circulated or were not photographed were left outside of the national imaginary.

Within this chapter, I analyze the development of the nationalist image of rural American⁶ poverty, and I aim to understand the popular imagination of Depression era America represented by the FSA archive. In terms of the Photographic File, the space outside of the frame is a space that is not generally considered. Failure to look critically beyond the frame constructs the contents of the frame as the whole picture. The claim of objectivity most heavily affects that which is left outside of the frame through epistemic processes of erasure and exclusion. Historian Nicole Guidotti-Hernandez's borderlands work provides a theoretical framework for this study through her discussion of the impact of the utterance upon nationalist mythologies. She critiques the "role of the nation-state in forming national imaginaries that perpetuate narratives of national amnesia."⁷ Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that nations are "'imagined communities'... that exist on too large a scale to be directly experienced by their members."⁸ While the presence of imagined community creates a sense of shared experience/identity, inclusion is defined by the exclusion of the Other. Guidotti-Hernandez cautions against the continued circulation of

⁶ I use this term "American" as it was used by the FSA, in reference to nationalist constructions of citizenship within the continental US. For the purposes of my analysis throughout I use US.

⁷ Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández, *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries* (NC: Duke University Press, 2011).¹³

⁸ Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds., *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 1 edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005). 234.

nationalist mythologies.⁹ In this case, the photographic unit is deployed by the State to form national imaginaries regarding rural poverty. This limited, selected view is dependent on exclusion or in Guidotti-Hernandez's terms "national amnesia."

Processes of erasure and exclusion related to RA/FSA images occurred primarily through two modes: image making and circulation. Through subject selection and image making processes, more frames were made of subjects considered popular, representative, or important. Processes of selection for circulation purposes further limited which images would be seen, in what contexts, and how often. Considering subject selection at the level of image making and circulation allows for analysis beyond the goals of the office. Instead of this limited scope, interrogating the intersection of image production and circulation illuminates the role of multiple social and cultural entities including media outlets, individual photographers, and RA/FSA regional offices in selection and exclusion practices. The possibility for FSA photographs to take an eventual place in the national imaginary was contingent on their circulation, whether in policy reports, newsprint, monograph, or exhibition. I contend that the requests and preferences of the different entities were intersecting rather than isolated or linear in impact. As discussed in chapter 2, levels of selection and exclusion were the result of relationships between the photographer, office, and media. This chapter considers calls for photographs from media outlets to the Historical Section, shooting scripts and assignments from Stryker to photographers in the field, publications, and political/economic pressure as elements that had shifting and conjunctural impact on final circulation level outcomes. This chapter also examines the RA/FSA archive in terms of the production and circulation of images of rural American families. Drawing from the contrasting material trajectories of "1936 Migrant Mother" and "1935 Migrant Mother,"

⁹ Guidotti-Hernández, *Unspeakable Violence*.

the first section discusses the relation between the photographers and the office, the media, and the political sphere as determining factors of what constituted compelling evidence and what would or would not be photographed and published.

The relationship among these three entities (Historical Section, media, political sphere) emerges from the historical documents as one that is distinctly non-linear and intersectional. An attempt to determine the source or initial cause for trends in image production and circulation would be, in many ways, impossible. However, it is possible to point to the processes employed by the multiple entities and to identify the trends that emerged. Stryker described this intersectional creation process as it related to exhibit curation.

STRYKER: But first of all it wasn't one person who conceived, well, there was no one person who decided where they [photos] were going to go, we had requests, we promoted some, we worked till we got some where we wanted them. Who designed the [exhibits]? Well, later on when Roskam came, he helped. Milton Tinsley helped design them. Sometimes the people themselves came in that wanted them and gave you ideas of what they'd like. There was no simple answer for the questions so far that you've asked me.¹⁰

While the overarching goal of the Historical Section remained constant, to depict rural America and its citizens, the specific photographic assignments and assignment themes varied depending on requests from the press, political committees, and government committees, and the Historical Section. The archive was built through shifting economic, political, and social goals. The interaction of all of these entities precludes framing any one individual as the cause for the contents or focus of the archive.

Stryker's desire to build a historically salient photographic archive was complicated by the goals of the RA/FSA to raise support for relief and rehabilitation programs and by the shifting impact of critiques of the office and threats to the office's continued existence. While the images were circulated as objective depictions of rural American experience, the selection

¹⁰ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker.

process was specific and targeted in order to present a compelling argument for the continued support of RA/FSA programs. Throughout Stryker's correspondence with photographers in the field, he took an urgent tone in encouraging them to capture what would be considered useful images. This urgency is often tied to comments about cuts to the office budget and criticism from media and administration. The correspondence as a whole presents Stryker as a director working to maintain an office that he believed might be shut down at any moment. While this is the tone he took in letters with the photographers, it may be that Stryker exaggerated his fears in order to motivate production. In retrospect, Tugwell corroborates that there was an air of criticism surrounding the New Deal programs in general and the photographic unit specifically.

TUGWELL: He [Stryker] was extremely conscious of the kind of criticism that might come from yokel congressmen, you know, who liked, in those days particularly, to make these small criticisms of people whom they called bureaucrats. They loved to dig out their mistakes and loved to dig out anything that they did that was unusual that they could write home about, or make a speech about—ridiculing them, you know. Of course, Stryker felt that he was very vulnerable, because he had people out taking pictures, and taking lots of pictures too.¹¹

Stryker's access to a federal budget to send photographers across the country to take pictures was criticized as a waste of taxpayer money during economic depression.¹² Budgetary concerns affected the ability of the office to control the way images were used within media reproductions and exhibits. However, to maintain the office, Stryker needed the photographs printed and used as widely and as often as possible, regardless of whether he or the Historical Section at large agreed with the use or presentation of each image. Hence, there are accounts of misappropriated images, quickly created exhibits, and poor layouts.

STRYKER: We saw a need, we had a lot of purposes, one, we were promoting ourselves by being useful, we were promoting Farm Security in strategic places, we were taking

¹¹ Oral history interview with Rexford Tugwell.

¹² Ibid.

care of our friends, in some places I was selling the photographic file indirectly and roundabout....Some exhibits we had to do, and none of us were very happy about them, they weren't well designed, they met somebody's specifications. They were for a purpose; we cooperated a lot in exhibits, we supplied the pictures, we made things for people who more or less told us what they wanted, and how they wanted it; we gritted our teeth and we made them.¹³

As this account suggests, image circulation was the result of a non-linear and sometimes contradictory set of processes. Even though Stryker had a broader historical vision for the File, he was still held to the original office expectation which was to garner support for RA/FSA programming. In the beginning of the project, the primary goal was to show the need for RA programs, which focused on resettling rural farm families from the Dust Bowl onto fertile land. At this time, images of the landscape were most prevalent, including depictions of widespread drought¹⁴ and subsequent flooding. At the mercy of the political climate, popular reception of the images, and the daily realities of rural experience, the focus of the photographs shifted several times from this initial drought theme to other related themes including tenancy and migrant families.

Stryker's Historical Section's task was to collect and disseminate compelling evidence of rural poverty that could be solved through RA and later FSA programs. Accomplishing this task was not easy because poverty was popularly conceptualized at the time as an urban problem.¹⁵ Rural poverty was both conceptually and spatially invisible to the targeted urban, middle class audience. In order to increase social support, the Historical Section had to present photographs nationally to the voting public and Washington politicians. Tugwell recalled the challenge of communicating the existence of rural poverty to this audience because "nobody was interested in

¹³ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker.

¹⁴ Droughts occurred throughout the American Midwest in 1934 and 1936, resulting in what was referred to as the Dust Bowl.

¹⁵ Gaer, *Toward Farm Security: The Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration*. 1.

these people. They didn't belong to any farm organization and usually their better-off neighbors either used them for part-time help or sharecroppers or some such way as this, and they were simply not interested in their welfare. They were an abandoned lot of people."¹⁶ Qualifying further, Tugwell explained the population that RA/FSA planned to help with rehabilitation programming was not inclusive of all who were poor in the rural US. To access help from RA/FSA programming, one had to prove that they were part of a class of deserving poor.

TUGWELL: There was always a reason why a man was poor, and why he was in trouble. Sometimes the reason was that he was poor human material, but this was not often. The trouble usually was that he was in difficulty with his land, because it had eroded, or because he was in the wrong place and drought had come along, or some other similar reason; his land perhaps had worn out.¹⁷

In this above interview excerpt, Tugwell distinguished between certain classes of poverty and help. First, he differentiated between poor individuals who did not deserve help (undeserving poor) because they were “poor human material” from those who did deserve help (deserving poor) because their poverty was the result of “difficult” or “worn out” land. The latter, deserving poor, were deemed “good farmers,” and could hope to receive relief, rehabilitation and loans. Tugwell’s descriptions of a class of deserving poor are representative of a delineation made more broadly, nationally, and within the RA/FSA regarding what populations of rural poor would receive federal help. In turn, images of a constructed class of potential rehabilitation clients, specifically as deserving poor, became central subjects for the Historical Section.

In order to prove the existence of rural poverty to those who were not experiencing the most visceral suffering or who were geographically disconnected from it, Stryker used the visual to distinguish between “deserving and undeserving poor” and to depict those in rural poverty

¹⁶ Oral history interview with Rexford Tugwell.

¹⁷ Ibid.

who were deserving of government help.¹⁸ FSA photographer Arthur Rothstein communicates his understanding of the deserving poor, “It was like a landscape of the moon populated by hard-working people, who through no fault of their own needed assistance and the only place they could get that assistance was from the government.”¹⁹ Rothstein’s words suggest that the distinction between deserving and undeserving was communicated by overt or covert means beyond administration offices and into the field. In order to understand how constructions of deserving and undeserving poor materialized within the File, I analyze three bodies of circulated RA/FSA photographs. The first, *Toward Farm Security: the Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration (Toward Farm Security)*, was printed for use by regional FSA staff. A Special Committee on Farm Tenancy produced the second, *The Farm Tenancy Report*, at the request of President Roosevelt. The third body of materials is an analysis of the RA/FSA Scrapbooks. These Scrapbooks hold an overview of published FSA images in publications for popular audiences. Together these collections provide an overview of the photographs chosen to move beyond the File and into the public eye.

“Toward Farm Security”: FSA Rehabilitation of Good Mothers

The construction of poverty and social welfare goals denoted by the RA/FSA were communicated to all regional and national staff through publications like *Toward Farm Security*. This manuscript is particularly important because it was used by the very staff who would determine who received rehabilitation loans. The following definition of deserving poor appears in the opening of *Toward Farm Security*, “Poor housing, poor diets, poor health are found

¹⁸ Cara Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 2003).¹⁹

¹⁹ (1:00 The Dustbowl) Ken Burns. 2014.

wherever there are poor people. Not lazy people. Not mentally unfit people. Not wasteful people. But people in despair.”²⁰ The opening also comments that “[r]ural poverty makes slaves out of free men; it weakens the strong and turns their faces to the wall.”²¹ This statement reflects the construction of the deserving poor as those who would elicit both empathy and identification because it is a state placed upon the virtuous man by external forces. In contrast to the dominant definition of the poor as found in urban space and underserving of help, the deserving poor are described in this passage as “rural,” with an unfortunate state placed upon “men” who are imbued with morality and dignity as they are imagined once “strong.” Characterizing poverty as a force that “makes slaves out of free men” points to rural farmers as American figures facing hardship in the “land of the free.” The image of the Midwest farmer as hardworking and deserving helped connect this population to the moral American citizen, a citizen for whom government financial intervention became possible. At the same time, the FSA scripted specific frameworks for how to identify poverty and how to eradicate it.

While the programs may have been popularly understood as grant assistance, the FSA required participation in both education and supervision.

It is not enough to point out to applicants that the acceptance of a grant or loan from the (FSA) necessarily means that they have to accept supervision and guidance in their general farm and home practices. The families must be convinced that they are as much in need of better management and better methods as they are of the money advanced to them.²²

The better management and methods were not limited to the farm; this surveillance and education program linked women’s roles within domestic space to the presence or absence of

²⁰ Gaer, *Toward Farm Security: The Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration*. 38.

²¹ *Ibid.* 30.

²² *Ibid.* 79.

poverty. Each regional office had a Home Management Section which involved the oversight of all families on FSA assistance. The focus, primarily through the education of mothers, was to “promote home production, conservation, and storage of food, better diets, better health, more adequate clothing, housing and sanitation, provision for necessary household equipment and furnishings, record keeping, education, recreation, and full participation in community life.”²³ The record also mentions access to modernized medical care for which the mother was also responsible.

Domestic conditions hailed as evidence of poverty included houses without bathrooms, without water piping, or with inadequate or no window screens.²⁴ These characteristics were considered troublesome because of their connection to disease via water pollution, mosquitos, exposure to winter temperatures, and unsanitary conditions.²⁵ Additionally, inadequate diet was also discussed in terms that specifically denoted what foods were believed to support bodily health. “The foods just listed generally are the ones that make the difference between good and poor diets.”²⁶ The statistics within the handbook list amounts needed for the following categories of “healthy foods:” milk, butter, eggs, tomatoes and citrus fruit, leafy, green, yellow vegetables, and meat and poultry. *Toward Farm Security* concludes, “[p]oor housing and poor diets combine to produce poor health.”²⁷ Through this approach the domestic sphere was marked as a gendered space in need of policing in order to control for failure (e.g. visible in sickness, clutter) that

²³ Ibid. 139.

²⁴ Ibid. 31.

²⁵ Ibid. 32.

²⁶ Ibid. 34.

²⁷ Ibid. 35.

would result in poverty. While the domestic sphere was targeted as a site through which to identify poverty, it was also a site marked fixable through the education of the good mother.

Using policy and rhetoric, *Toward Farm Security* qualified the FSA's ability to help those in need. The project delineated which families could qualify for FSA support by developing an image of the deserving poor defined as those who could be educated into modernity. Some families would be ineligible in terms of education. For example, "Adults who do not understand their plight...cannot be rehabilitated. They cannot become self-sustaining. They may succeed as long as they are supervised and managed, but they fall back into their original state as soon as they are left alone."²⁸ Education and supervision were presented as the primary means through which to help those who were identified as suffering from poverty, but not everyone could be educated or supervised. The primary focal points for domestic improvement were the house, health, and sanitation; however, these could only be improved if the family in question fit two main FSA criteria. First, their poverty must be caused by external forces (such as the barren land) upon which they had no control and was no fault of their own; and second, they must be capable of learning modern ways of living. The Home Management Section was tasked with "developing criteria which will insure more realistic planning and provide a better level of living for all families being assisted by the Farm Security Administration."²⁹ That which was understood as a "better level of living" was based on industrialization era constructions of modern American citizenship. As such, I ask who was included in the FSA's construction of the modern American citizen, as this was a construction that was visually circulated to a national audience via the photographic unit's images?

²⁸ Ibid. 91.

²⁹ Ibid. 139.

The text of *Toward Farm Security* describes its purpose as “planned and prepared for the new Farm Security employee” and “designed primarily to orient the new County Supervisor to his or her job, and was intended as a general introduction to the theory and practice of Farm Security.”³⁰ As such, the photographs therein must also be approached as representative of the goal of the text overall: “as a general introduction to the theory and practice of Farm Security.” The thirty FSA photographs included in *Toward Farm Security* appear over eighteen consecutive pages bound within the text. The majority of the images serve as evidence of success within rehabilitation programming, but there are a few images included which depict the state of poor families prior to entering FSA programming. Both types of images frame the subjects as part of the population served by the FSA. One such example of both types of depictions (before and after) is shown in a series of four images on two adjoining pages (fig 3.1). The first page includes an image of migrant families with their cars packed heavy for travel above an image of a young mother and child sitting outside of the tent they have been living in. The woman stares straight into the lens, totally unflinching, while the child digs in the dirt and dust. In terms of representations of families, it is notable that this image does not include a father. The page reads, “America’s farm migrants—sprouted—hopeless” suggesting the hardship that poverty places on the American family. On the adjoining page there is an image of tents and mobile homes in a row above another photograph. This last photograph (of the four) shows a family, including two parents and two children all neatly dressed and gardening together outside of their new home (presumably). The structure, representing the home, is not fully included in the frame.

³⁰ Ibid. Foreword by C. B. Baldwin III

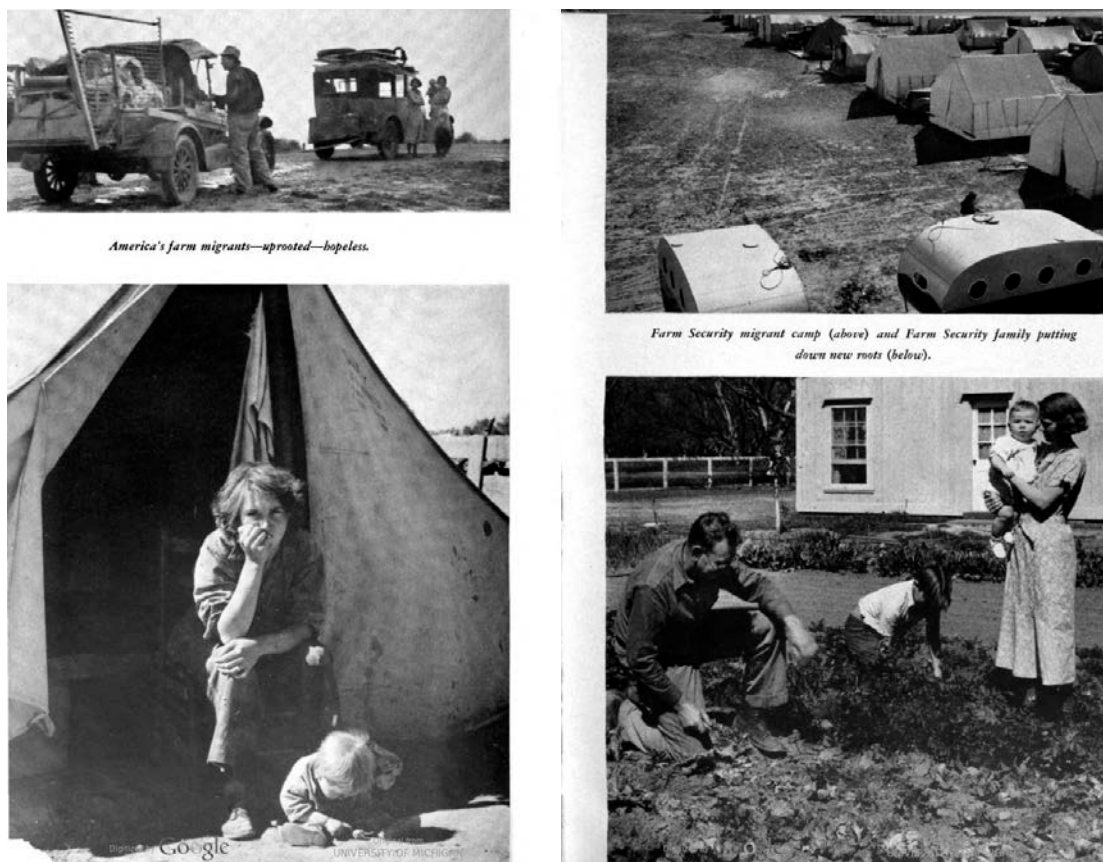


FIGURE 3.1 Toward Farm Security. Two Adjoining Pages.³¹

The page reads, “Farm Security migrant camp (above) and Farm Security family putting down new roots (below).” The two-page layout contrasts the apparently fragmenting effect that poverty can have on the American family with the cohesion and self-reliance that can result from attaining client status with the FSA. The images of families and individuals who are still suffering affirmed the need for the FSA and their contrasting images demonstrate the success of the FSA. I would also argue that the families who are shown in all eighteen pages would have been presumed as part of those who could access help from the FSA, visually constructing the imagined category of “the eligible client.” Showing undeserving poor, or families who would not be eligible for client status, such as non-citizens, would not serve the overarching goals of the publication.

³¹ Ibid.

Several of the included images show mothers conforming to modern health and sanitation expectations. For example, figure 3.2 shows a mother taking part in what would constitute a modern healthcare system through use of FSA clinics and doctors. The physician plays a paternal role. He is older and takes up almost half of the frame. He leans down over the woman and her two children, as the elder of the two looks up with curiosity. The elements of the image communicate the importance of this type of modern medical care and the ability of this mother to learn (via the FSA) to care “correctly” for her children. The mother’s ability to learn is central to her depiction as a client because the text of *Toward Farm Security* differentiates those who can be educated from those who cannot as contingent for client status. Many of the images of mothers point to successful education. The page contains the following text: “Farm families handicapped by ill health are taught sanitation and assisted by the Farm Security Administration to obtain medical care through visiting physicians...and FSA clinics.” As in this case, mothers are not always distinctly mentioned in the captions, but the role of the mother is implicated by the paired photographic content.



FIGURE 3.2 FSA family receiving medical examination, North Carolina. *Toward Farm Security*.

The third image page in *Toward Farm Security* (fig. 3.3) shows a family sitting at the dinner table in a scene reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's 1942 "Thanksgiving," the famous painting which originally held the decidedly apropos title "Freedom from Want." The image and text offer a comment specifically about women and their ability to successfully provide within the domestic sphere. FSA rehabilitation and education for mothers focused on canning, preserving, gardening, and cooking balanced meals throughout the year. The caption reads, "Low-income farm families are taught by the FSA how to achieve a balanced and ample diet through the 'live-at-home' program. Meats, vegetables, and fruit produced on the farm are canned and preserved for the farm family table," attributing the family's success to FSA education programs. Within the frame is a mother figure sitting across from a father figure, they are joined by three children. The table is carefully set with items from the handbook's healthy diet list³² including full glasses of milk, plates of meat and what may be dishes of applesauce or other mashed fruit. The contents of the table prove the success of the mother in planning and providing this healthy (i.e. FSA sanctioned) meal for her family. The table is neat and clean, covered with a cloth and has a vase of fresh flowers in the center. All are smiling. Underlying is a comment on the ability of the family to overcome poverty. Their success is heavily reliant on the ability of the mother to succeed in her role within the domestic space.

³² Ibid. 35.



FIGURE 3.3 A family at dinner, Coffee County, Ala. *Toward Farm Security*

While the publication serves to illustrate the existence of rural poverty and methods for establishing farm security, most of the images chosen for publication include a clear and direct depiction of farm families or refer to the stability of the family via caption or image content. Seventeen of the frames show mothers with children, mothers learning better domestic practices, or children within the domestic sphere. I consider these seventeen images together because all of them serve similar if not the same overarching purpose. The images provide evidence of what “good” or “successful” mothering was supposed to look like. Moreover, because the images exist in connection to the rest of *Toward Farm Security*’s content, the reader/viewer would be likely to interpret these depictions of good mothers as evidence that FSA programming was effective and that good mothers were foundational to the rural family’s ability to escape poverty.

The images within *Toward Farm Security* provided a Washington-endorsed visual construction of who might be eligible for client status to the very staff in regional offices across the country who could grant such status. All of the mothers and women, actually every human subject, included in *Toward Farm Security's* eighteen photographic pages read phenotypically as white. The homogenous representation of race and centralizing of whiteness within this record is one more example of a broad and vast (but still limited) Photographic File serving, through processes of selection and circulation, to reinforce constructions of whiteness as tied to the identity of potential clients. The image of the deserving rural poor was a powerful rhetoric used to derive social and congressional support for the RA/FSA Programs. Through images circulated during the period, RA/FSA photographs reinforced the construction of those who might be imagined as a client. The FSA programs' visual construction of eligible clients was gendered and racialized as it presented poverty and escape from poverty as grounded in the education of eligible individuals, particularly the white appearing mother. Textually, the FSA defined the route out of poverty as contingent on the woman's ability to succeed as a mother; however, this ability was grounded in her capacity to be educated. The content of *Toward Farm Security* was distributed to regional FSA offices but the themes therein were not isolated to this one text.

This is America: Compelling Evidence

Stryker directed the photographers with an eye toward maintaining a File that would have interest for the media. He was in constant contact with newspaper and magazine editors. He also worked to develop subjects based on current political reports and populations that were pulling focus as a result of policy. In his correspondence with photographers, Stryker distinguished between successful and unsuccessful images; often he appeared to be directing the

photographers' focus towards populations and subjects that would be most marketable and most likely to achieve broad circulation. While the selections in this chapter focus on images of people and families, many of the assignments in the first years of the office were designated to capture the landscape and evidence of drought and flooding. In 1935, Stryker's letters and the circulated RA photographic material considered the family but centered on the state of the land. Stryker suggested the photographers show the dry, desolate landscape in order to provide proof that farming was no longer tenable. Overall, much of the completed File reflects the interest of the office to visually represent the state of the farmer in the field. The themes throughout this chapter gesture to the state of the farmer, but are centrally focused on the state of the rural American family as a primary site through which deserving poverty and client status were imagined.

In 1936, there was a marked shift towards images of people, particularly those impacted by the Dust Bowl. The themes within these sets of images included migrants, clients, movement, and rehabilitation projects at work. In February 1936 while Lange was in Southern California, Stryker wrote to her with a loose shooting script, "While you are in the South please try to get any slum pictures that you might be able to pick up in Los Angeles or in the small towns nearby...the people, the activities, homes, any community buildings and good character pictures. I hope you get good stuff among the pea pickers."³³ This is very likely the assignment that sent her towards the area in Nipomo Valley where she photographed the 1936 Migrant Mother. Within Stryker's letter, he requested "slum pictures" which would provide evidence of the existing poverty that the RA was working to resolve. He also requested "good character pictures" to provide the audience with representations of those imagined as possible FSA clients. Stryker referred to "good character" pictures and "good families" throughout his years directing the

³³ Historical Section, "Written Records."

project. Evidence of unsuccessful images came through killed images, those not entered into the File and never circulated. Walker Evans' refusal to produce images based on Stryker's directions led to his eventual dismissal,

STRYKER: It was very simple. He didn't stay on the project because I had to cut down staff, and Walker wasn't going to cooperate, much as I would like to have had him go on. I liked to have his pictures but I had to have people who would not only take the pictures they wanted, they were contributions, but all of us had some routine jobs that had to be done.³⁴

Stryker's call for "good families" suggests that just as there was a differentiation between the deserving poor and underserving poor there were also families and characters who were good and others who were not. The use of these terms suggests that there were expectations and standards beyond aesthetics in terms of good and bad photographic representations of rural American families.

In his interview with Doud, Stryker recalled a conversation with Ruth Goodhue, managing editor of *Architectural Forum*. She expressed interest in what appeared to be a theme throughout the RA/FSA photographs. She asked whether or not all small towns in America were in fact the same. It appears that based on her interaction with the FSA photographs her understanding was that rural America was a fairly homogenous space.

STRYKER: Ruth Goodhue said at breakfast one morning to me, she had seen some of the things we were doing, I had talked to her about some ideas and she said, "Roy Stryker, are all towns of 5,000 just alike? Do you think so because they use the same boiler plate, because they listen to the same radio programs, because they eat the same brand of breakfast foods, the same labels on them?"³⁵

Within the context of the broader use and creation of the File, this conversation illustrates the debate surrounding whether the trend that Goodhue noticed was the result of objective

³⁴ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker.

³⁵ Ibid.

representation of reality or a partial and selective frame. Based on the analysis in chapter 2, I contend that it is the latter. I find that Goodhue points to the limited view of rural America that was propagated and circulated. Stryker's further discussion of Goodhue's analysis is also telling. He explains that, to the surprise of some, he would admit that during the project years he never visited many of the small towns represented by his office.

STRYKER: You see, when the photographers went out to all these places, it was the Goddamnest [*sic*] vicarious travel that one man ever had the privilege of doing, the excitement, the fun of seeing their faces because they were seeing these things by this time with a pattern that was already formed not that the picture looked like this but it fitted [*sic*] into "this is America" for some reason or other I liked it, as a matter of fact.³⁶

Goodhue's conclusion about the homogeneity of rural America is a reflection not of the space but the selected circulated images. Not only is the view limited but Stryker never visited many of the places that he was claiming to understand and represent. In lieu of physically visiting, Stryker's engagement in vicarious travel likely enabled his maintenance of a hegemonic standpoint because he did not have to encounter any scenario that might challenge his perspective. As director, Stryker controlled much of the essentializing process of selection in terms that determined which images would be included in or excluded from the File. He also directed photographers in the field regarding desirable material. Stryker's position allowed him to take part in a process of selection that determined which images were included in or excluded from the File. He was also able to direct photographers in the field in terms of desirable material. Stryker's selection process intersected directly with media and government circulation selection. This is not to say that Stryker selected every image that circulated; he did, however, narrow the field by selecting the contents of the File. Concurrently, media selections that proved valuable and popular also directed Stryker's view. Through analysis of images of families considered

³⁶ Ibid.

desirable (those that were circulated in texts like *Toward Farm Security*), in contrast to those that were not (not circulated, not taken) the process of selection and construction emerges as covertly imbedded in field assignments, image selection, and circulation processes.

In April 1936, Stryker wrote to Rothstein to tell him which photographs were most successful and what based on Rothstein's most recent assignment might be improved; "Your dust pictures were most excellent. I think you ought to get us a little wider selection, however, as these are going to be used a great deal and we need a large variety...I believe it is advisable to pick up a few more of the scenes....There are too few pictures of human beings."³⁷ Stryker's request for "human beings" further suggests the need to produce interesting, sympathy-provoking content of potential clients and reflects the broader shift from landscapes to pictures of people. The series that Stryker refers to in his April 1936 letter to Rothstein has since become an icon of the project. While few frames contain human beings, "Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm" succeeded in communicating the themes of human suffering and resilience that Stryker sought. This image (fig. 3.4) shows a man and two young children running towards shelter in the midst of a dust storm. The photograph is confrontational in its ability to convey to the viewer the excruciating, seemingly endless struggle of the family against the landscape and the elements. Almost the entire frame is filled with the suffocating dust that filled the plains and decimated the crops. Moreover, the scale of the image shows their bodies as small against a vast natural world. The image depicts survival and strength in the face of hopelessness, as the bodies appear to physically push against the dust and wind. As a still image, the viewer never has the closure of seeing the family reach their destination. This is a family who will always push

³⁷ Stryker, Horvath, and University of Louisville, *Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972*. Stryker to Rothstein 4/13/36

against the dust. The viewer is positioned to view their plight sympathetically, to hope for human survival against the land.



FIGURE 3.4 Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma, by Arthur Rothstein, 1936.

The three figures within the image are cast as a familial version of David in a battle against the pastoral Goliath. Centralizing a family struggling against the American landscape successfully marks their bodies as deserving poor. Rothstein's Dust Bowl images proved a popular success. In May, Stryker wrote to Rothstein with accounts of other office successes that resulted in part from the dust pictures. He describes the Leica show in Washington, "the Resettlement section in the show was the most outstanding thing there, both in quantity and quality."³⁸ Quantity and quality

³⁸ Stryker to Rothstein: 5/23/36 "the Leica show arrived in Washington, and that the Resettlement section in the show was the most outstanding thing there, both in quantity and quality. ...you are going to get one of your pictures in the U.S. Camera"

of photographs were two distinct outcomes necessary to prove that the project should continue to receive funding. In a letter to Lange, Edwin Locke (an assistant to Stryker) wrote with excitement, “We are snowed under with requests for Arthur Rothstein’s drought area, migratory labor pictures and photographs took in the drought area. All this material is being grasped at eagerly by all press services, newspapers, and magazines. We are getting the greatest spread that we have ever had.”³⁹ By July 1936, the office received a rising number of requests for migratory labor images and Rothstein’s Dust Bowl pictures.⁴⁰

The successful circulation of the Dust Bowl pictures was a boon for the office. At the same time, Stryker’s capacity to direct the photographers based on circulation needs existed in conflict with his personal desire to develop the File in the way that he imagined it. He was split by his drive to develop a historically salient file and his duty to maintain public support and funding for the office. Throughout his years as Director, he expressed frustration over external orders and the need to abide by outside expectations. Although frustrated, he remained keenly aware of the unstable space that his office occupied. It appears that out of a desire to maintain the office he often chose to fulfill external requests despite a personal impetus to do otherwise. One example of Stryker fulfilling media requests in spite of frustration is shown in a letter to Arthur Rothstein regarding special reports and progress photography. Progress photography refers to images of rehabilitation administration projects and evidence of their success over time. These were most often “before” and “after” rehabilitation pictures of rural farm families. For Stryker, public demands for progress photography took away from his field photographers building a comprehensive file of America. In late April 1936, Stryker wrote, “Did you get any pictures of

³⁹ Roy Stryker Papers. Edwin Locke to Lange 7/7/36

⁴⁰ “Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma.” by Arthur Rothstein, 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsc.00241>

the troops holding up the ‘tramps’ as they tried to cross? We are getting farther and farther behind...thanks to special reports and progress photography, and a lot of other damn nonsense.”⁴¹ Stryker provided Rothstein with specific suggestions about progress photography in the following informal script.

The *news people are running us ragged for such things as the following*: (a) Dept Adjustment Committee at work (even if staged); (b) agricultural advisers talking with clients regarding planting problems, farm layout, and so on; (c) home demonstration advisers conferring with wives regarding gardens, canning, etc.; (d) health pictures such as bad sanitary conditions, relationship between drainage, and wells and springs; (e) on projects, fewer but more carefully shot pictures of the present state of the projects.⁴²

The demands for these images came from the media and the images included (whether the media was aware or not) potentially staged images. Broadly, the image list was a request for representation of rehabilitation in process, and examples of successfully rehabilitated farm life from farming practices to domestic space. Specifically, the script reflected the connection between the news and the RA/FSA programming model of potential clients as exhibited in *Toward Farm Security*. Specifically, by requesting “home demonstration advisers conferring with wives regarding gardens, canning” and “health pictures such as bad sanitary conditions, relationship between drainage, and wells and springs” the script reinforces poverty as determined by the success or failure of the mother within the domestic sphere regarding health, diet, and organization. The script suggests that the FSA construction of potential clients and deserving poor was not isolated to the FSA as an agency. External news sources were also requesting content that aligned with the content and message found in *Toward Farm Security*.

⁴¹ Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972. Stryker to Rothstein 4/29/36

⁴² Addendum to Stryker to Rothstein 4/29/36

Popularly Circulated: Representative, Typical, Good Clients

Successful progress photography was desired by news publications and necessary for government publications like the *1937 Committee on Farm Tenancy Report*. In order to encourage more successful progress photographs, Stryker pushed the photographers towards a shift in method. The shift was from an episodic framing approach of communities and landscapes that covered a broad swath of population and space to thematic framing that focused on specific families and individual stories.

I would recommend that you cover less ground, but do it more intensively. I say this more definitively than ever now, since the head of the AP Special Feature Section was in town the other day and glanced over some of your material. It was his feeling that it would be more usable for their purpose and for other picture papers if the family were treated as fully as possible. However, I am not suggesting that you dropped the general background work that you have been doing we have need for that too.⁴³

M. E. Gilrond Director of the Division of Information wrote to Ralph Armstrong of Jersey Homesteads October 28, 1936, “Naturally such before-and-after treatment would be much more effective if they concern the same family before-and-after their settlement.”⁴⁴ Gilman’s request for before-and-after images of the same family points to the desire to circulate images that could prove the effectiveness of the program. By showing a family in squalor and later living in a “modern” home, RA/FSA offices aimed to prove that through its programming, families experiencing rural poverty could be rehabilitated into independent citizens. This approach was beneficial because with only a few images, a publication could show the possibility for a family to transition from nothing to something. The weakness of shifting to an episodic frame was the increased reliance on representative families. At this time, correspondence between Stryker, the

⁴³ Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972. Stryker to Lee January 19, 1937

⁴⁴ Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972. Gilmond to Armstrong. 10/28/36

photographers, and the media contain terms “representative,” “good,” and “typical families” in images requests and image captions.

A letter from Gardner Cowles Jr., Editor for the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, to Roy Stryker in November 1936 provides one example of the use of the term “typical.” Cowles wrote Stryker with requests for “intimate pictures of typical families of the type to be reached by Resettlement Administration.” He wanted images of these families within “the worst conditions in the South” and explains to Stryker that these are “pictures which might run under the headline ‘can such conditions possibly exist in United States?’”⁴⁵ Figure 3.5 shows a picture story like the one to which Cowles referred.



FIGURE 3.5 Des Moines Register. May 2, 1937

⁴⁵ Gardner Cowles Jr. to Stryker from the Des Moines Register and Tribune November 23, 1936.

The story was published in the *Des Moines Register* several months after Cowles' letter to Stryker. The headline and content focus on the conditions of tenant families. The correspondence from Cowles suggested that "typical families" who were experiencing the worst of rural poverty were living outside of the standards of living set by the United States. These modern standards center on the attainment of modern consumer conveniences borne out of the industrial revolution. The proposed story framed extreme poverty for "typical" families as unacceptable and essentially un-American. Within the *Register* story, the "typical families" all appear white, suggesting that the request for "typical families" was indicating whiteness. Images of these families are proposed as spectacle via the question posed to the audience, "can such standards exist in the United States?" This question also positions white, rural poverty as potentially less acceptable (or surprising) than poverty among Black or Mexican appearing families. I am interested in whether the terms "typical," "good," and "representative" functioned this way more generally throughout the course of the photographic program.

Late in 1936, the RA continued photographing families that could be or were clients. Reflected in *The Register* story, the nation as a whole, and the Historical Section in particular were increasingly interested in rural farm tenancy. In November 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to the Secretary of Agriculture, the Honorable Henry A. Wallace, and requested that he serve as chairman of the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy. The committee was developed to

[t]horoughly examine and report on the most promising ways of developing a land tenure system which will bring an increased measure of security, opportunity, and well-being to the great group of present and prospective farm tenants. The rapid increase of tenant farmers during the past half century is significant evidence that we have fallen far short of achieving the traditional American ideal of owner-operated farms.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Roosevelt, Franklin D, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: F.D. Roosevelt, 1936, Volume 5* (1938). 591.

Tenant farmers rented land to farmers paying with cash or a share of the crops. The Administration held that tenancy was a primary cause of rural poverty because it was a labor system that left the farmer with no individual ownership or pride over his land. The tenant farmer was more likely to over-farm, focus on soil-depleting cash crops, and lack motivation to care for his home and barns. From FSA's perspective, tenancy was also a risk to the family because of "hardships caused by constant moving from farm to farm, the dissipation of the energies of the families and the social costs of the ignorance, poor health and broken morale it has caused."⁴⁷ Thus, tenancy drained the farmland, the home, and the community, and posed a structural risk for US families.

In the months following Roosevelt's letter, Stryker's correspondence to photographers focused on tenancy and photographs for *The Farm Tenancy Report*. On several occasions, he also noted that news of the Committee on Farm Tenancy had stirred national interest in tenancy images to which the Historical Section would need to respond, "*The New York Times*, *The Des Moines Register*, and various other papers are hollering now for anything we can get hold of on farm tenancy."⁴⁸ Stryker also hoped RA/FSA images would be published within the report.⁴⁹ "The tenancy report is coming along, and we hope to get quite a lot of picture[s] in it."⁵⁰ In one particularly provocative letter, Stryker wrote to Rothstein to explain that the File was short on "good southern tenancy pictures." He suggested that Rothstein "find families that are fairly representative of the conditions of the tenancy areas, then take quite a series of pictures of each

⁴⁷ Gaer, *Toward Farm Security: The Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration*. 23.

⁴⁸ Stryker, Horvath, and University of Louisville, Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972. Stryker to Lee 12/1/36.

⁴⁹ Stryker to Locke 2/13/37 "Judging from the interest that the tenancy committee's report has created, we should be prepared to supply plenty of material"

⁵⁰ Stryker to Lange. 2/19/37.

of these families, showing the house, the people, the children, the farm, the buildings and fences, etc.”⁵¹ As the terms “representative,” “good,” and “typical” were used in correspondence to photographers and with media offices, I am interested in what these words meant for the selection of images made and those selected for circulation. Particularly, I want to know if the use of these terms implicate whiteness as they did for Cowles.

Following Stryker’s letter to Rothstein (among others) and the growing interest in images of tenancy, images of tenant farm families appear in government and popular publications. The contents prove informative of the meaning inferred by “good,” “typical,” and “representative.” *The Farm Tenancy Report* was released in 1937 by the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy and contains eight photographs from the RA/FSA. All of the images include captions. The first image depicts the barren landscape, suggesting issues including drought and over-farming as part of the problem that must be solved in order to solve rural poverty. It is paired with the caption “A Tenant Farmer’s Eroding Fields.” The second photograph, captioned “A Sharecroppers Home on High Mississippi Delta Land” shows the landscape and a small shelter in the distance. The image reads as a landscape. Upon close examination, almost imperceptibly small, in front of the home, are three dark-skinned children kneeling by the porch. They are so small that they may not register as image content; moreover, they are not mentioned within the caption. The children, who are not the central subjects of the image, are the only subjects in the report who do not appear white. The third image shows the close-cropped view of a house’s foundation and is paired with the caption, “Dilapidated Corncrib on a Tenant Farm in the Corn Belt.” These first three images have focused on landscape, farming, and the state of the home.

⁵¹ Stryker to Rothstein 2/5/ 1937

The fourth image in the Report is the first portrait included. It is a portrait of a family and includes two women and three children standing on the porch of their home. The caption reads, “Home and Family of a Cropper in the Corn Belt.” The position of the family reads as a semi-formal arrangement. All of the subjects stand close together; the adult figures hold straight, stiff, if not proud, postures. All appear light-skinned. The stance, position, and eye contact of the subjects suggest formality and some level of respect or connection between those in the frame and the photographer. At the same time, the image is made from a farther distance than a formal portrait. This suggests a practical need to depict not only the family but the home as well. The full home is not visible but what is visible appears worn but kempt with screens on every visible window. The varying hand positions, hanging by one child’s sides, at another’s mouth, present hesitation on the part of the subjects and impart the image with a candid element. The candidness reinforces the discourse of objectivity by depicting a family who has encountered the camera during the course of a natural day.

The next two images also have human subjects, who also appear to be white. The first image shows inhabitants in a car that is packed for migration, very similar to the migration image included in *Toward Farm Security*. The caption explains that this family is made up of “Migratory Agricultural Workers in California: A Family of Former Farm Operators from the Great Plains,” pointing to their displacement from the Great Plains and their forced migration west. The second (fig. 3.6) shows a woman sweeping the doorstep of a small shack-like shelter. She is wearing a flower dress and looks down to focus on her work. The home is surrounded by scrap metal, baskets, trash, and remnants of old cars. Her presence is not mentioned, the image is instead captioned, “Home in a Shack Village Occupied by Farm Laborers in the Middle West.” This caption does not appear to be a noted critique of the woman’s living conditions, as it does

not overtly mention her attempt to clean or her failure to maintain order of the domestic sphere. Instead, it describes the shack as home and allows the reader to interpret. The seventh image in the series within *The Farm Tenancy Report* returns to a focus on the landscape depicting the wide horizon and deep fields, which hold a farmhouse and barn in the center of the frame. The final photograph caption reads, “Improvements on a Corn-Belt Tenant Farm Rented from a Member of the Operator’s Family Under Good Tenure Conditions.” By centering a towering barn that stands in good shape next to what appears to be a working vehicle, the audience can visualize successful rehabilitation. As the culminating image in the photographic series, it communicates the possibility for improvement and help for tenancy families shown earlier in the Report.

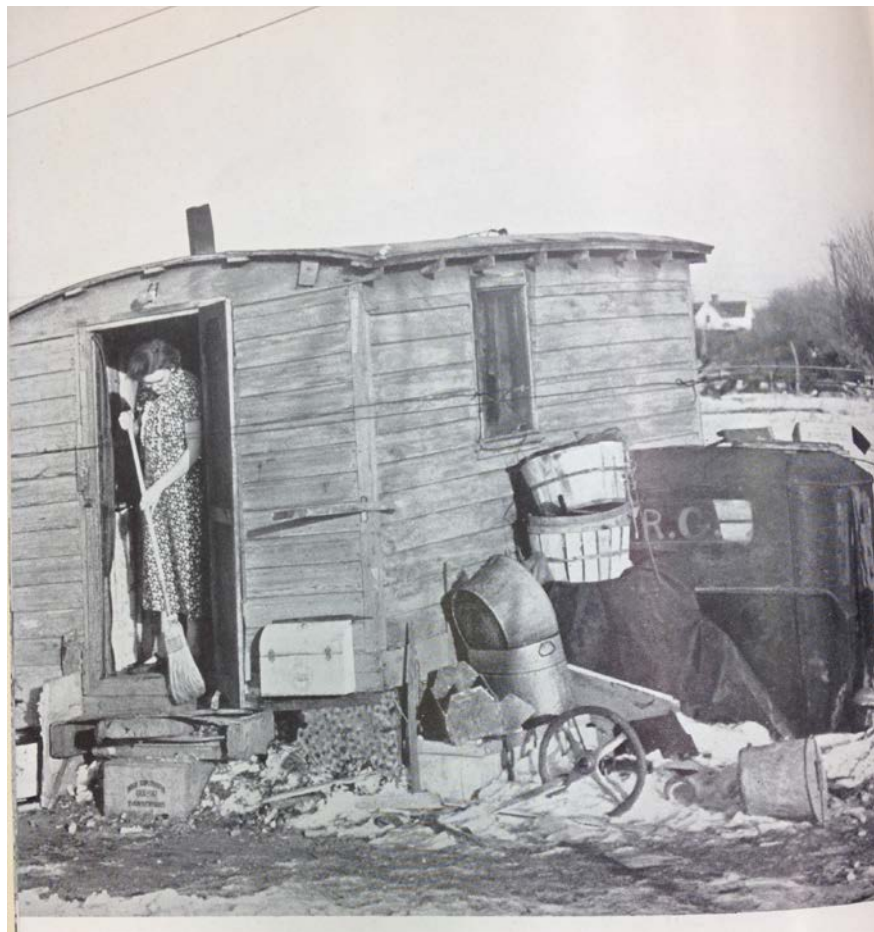


FIGURE 3.6 Home in a Shack Village Occupied by Farm Laborers in the Middle West

In sum, four of the eight photographs in the series include people within the frame, and three of those four focus on people as the primary subject. The photographs that focus on humans as the primary subject exclusively include people who appear white. They also only include women and children. The eight photographs included were selected by the tenancy commission to represent the problem of tenancy in the rural United States. These images were meant not only to be representative, but to be effective as proof and documentation of a problem that warranted federal funding. In response to the report, the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act was passed on February 6, 1937.⁵² The Act would provide funds for rehabilitating tenant farm families through Farm Security Administration programs, the FSA, which replaced the Resettlement Administration in 1937, and became the new home of the Historical Section.

The visual rhetoric presented in *The Farm Tenancy Report* is consistent with the construction of white families as deserving poor and possible clients seen in *Toward Farm Security*. *The Farm Tenancy Report* provides an example of the selection of representative families in publications that imagine FSA client identity. Using *The Farm Tenancy Report* and *Toward Farm Security* as examples, it seems that requests for “representative families” resulted in productions of whiteness almost exclusively. At the same time, these publications only give a sense of those FSA photographs chosen for public consumption. On the other hand, the RA/FSA Scrapbooks contain clippings from newspaper and magazine stories that featured RA/FSA images. The scrapbooks provide a broader look at the types of images that were circulated out of the File.

I completed research with the FSA Scrapbooks containing January through June of 1935, 1937 and 1939. Of the 288 images that included human subjects, 230 contained only subjects

⁵² Roosevelt, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. 593.

who appeared white. These subjects were not identified in captions or titles as “white.” Of nine images of Black subjects, all but one included some racial marker in the caption. The one image that did not include any racial marker was part of a longer story that included other images that were racially defined. One of the images of a Black subject appeared inside *Opportunity: Journal for Negro Life*. The article included a photograph which showed a man carrying home a sack of feed. The image was paired with the headline “The Negro Farm Owner Isn’t Licked.”⁵³ The photograph is a portrait of a Black farmer, one of few circulated in connection to FSA programming, but it appeared within a publication that was specifically targeting a Black audience. The circulated image is thus racially defined and marginalized through its caption and the context in which it is published.

Based on the findings within the Scrapbooks, I conclude that subjects who were identified as outside of normative whiteness were consistently labeled racially, while subjects who appeared white were rarely labeled in terms of race. In lieu of overtly racializing language, pairing the terms “typical,” “good,” “representative,” and “average” with images only of subjects who appeared white reaffirmed whiteness as normative. Moreover, when terms including “typical,” “good,” “representative,” and “average” were requested, images of white appearing subjects were published. Labeling photographs of Black, Asian, and Mexican subjects with racial markers while not labeling white subjects in the same way, constructs non-white subjects as outside of the rhetorical boundaries of the normative or universal.

This image (fig. 3.7) published in National Farm News of Washington DC, May 1936, appears under the headline “the Resettlement Administration offers opportunities to rural families.” The caption reads, “A rural farm family in Indiana talks matters over with

⁵³ RA/FSA Scrapbooks. (exl ln 224) Opportunity Journal for Negro Life, 6/39.

representative of the Resettlement Administration preparatory to being transferred to a better home and improved living conditions.” The mother is shown holding her smallest child and standing with the rest of her brood while the husband and father of the household looks over paperwork with Resettlement Administration representatives. This photograph and caption are representative of a trend in circulated FSA photographs of client families. The precedent set by these images most often, and almost exclusively, is that clients are white *families* that include a mother, father, and several children. As seen in this image, all should appear healthy, specifically the children. The value of multiple children was that eventually they would be able to help sustain the farm. This type of image, reproduced of many families over the years of RA/FSA programming, established a visual account of those who the public could imagine as receiving help from the federal government for rural rehabilitation. These images are also reflective of the type of client family imagined within *Toward Farm Security*. Because this is the circulated construction of the RA/FSA client, I refer to this visual construction as the “possible client family” and the “representative client family.” The former is a family who is still in a state of poverty but is discussed or depicted visually as possible client. The latter is a family who is discussed or depicted visually as a current client family. These two categories were visually constructed to garner support from the US populous. The visual construction of these families framed who could be imagined as a possible FSA client.



FIGURE 3.7 Resettlement Administration Offers Opportunities.

The Providence Sunday Journal, May 24, 1939, Section II provides an example of a picture story (fig. 3.8) of a family presented as potential and representative client family via visual proximity to pictures of FSA homes or projects. This first image on the left shows a family portrait. Like other images of people who appear white, this family is not racially marked. The mother, seated, holds the smallest child while an older child leans closely to her and looks straight at the viewer. The father is seated beside them and has another young child leaning against him, knee high. He has a hand, paternally placed on the child's arm. In between the two, seated parents and the children closest to them is a fourth child, apparently close in age to the others, seated and hunched over the dirt. The entire family and their clothes are worn and thin. However, they are depicted in a traditional formal portrait style that displays them as a family unit. The closeness of their bodies and their seated positions indicate that they were posed to

some extent. More so, the father is placed, visually, in the most powerful position, sitting the highest. He is depicted as capable, literally and figuratively looking over his family, in spite of the hardship they face. The right boundary of the portrait touches the boundary of two other photographs. The bottom image depicts “a squalid camp for migrants” showing a row of tents in various states of disrepair. Above the camp is a photograph of new construction with a caption that reads, “workmen are building one of the government’s model farm communities.” These images pose a question to the viewer. Should the family in the left-hand image remain in squalor or thrive in FSA housing? As a series, these photographs present the viewer with a proposition common to circulated FSA image stories: the family shown is a “good,” “typical,” potential client family who lives in these unacceptable conditions. Through the work of RA/FSA programs, shouldn’t families “like these” be given the opportunity to thrive in new settings?



FIGURE 3.8 Providence Sunday Journal. 1939.

Within this photograph, (fig. 3.9), the focus is on the mother and her three children in the doorway of their home. With harsh, unerring stares, the subjects confront the viewer. On its own, the photograph frames the family in a specific moment; they are together, the mother is central to the space, all of the children are near her, and they are connected to domesticity via proximity to the house. When viewed in conjunction with the caption, further context and closure is placed upon the subject. The caption reads,

Above, A typical family in Arkansas, the children wearing sacks made into garments. The mother, pinched by poverty and despair, wears a man's cast-off shoes. The well-worn broom and cleanliness of the rags they wear would seem to indicate that their plight is not due to shiftlessness. The children, of good stock, would be the pride of parents anywhere. The lovely little blonde could be a Cinderella in any story.

The family is defined as “typical,” illustrative of the coding of whiteness as normal not only in Historical Section Written Records but also in circulated materials. While the worn and tattered nature of the children's and mother's clothing are commented on, it is also noted that their rags are “cleanly.” The “well-worn broom” also suggests a favorable reading of the mother performing her duty to take care of the domestic space as best she can in the circumstances of poverty. The result is the separation of the mother's body from the cause of poverty. The mother is depicted as capable within the domestic sphere and not as responsible for her family's poverty. They are imagined as deserving poor. The children are referred to in terms reflective of scientific racism and preference for whiteness. Referring to the children as “good stock” places them in conversation with the eugenics movement and the desire to strengthen the genetic makeup of the country. While never referred to as “white,” the family is discussed in terms that mark them as deserving poor who are rehabilitatable, potential clients based on frameworks related to whiteness.



FIGURE 3.9 Uncensored views of Share-Croppers Misery. January 1937.

Additionally, the photograph in figure 3.9 was published underneath a headline that referred to the image contents as an “uncensored view.” Such a headline reinforced the image’s place within discourses of objectivity and grounded them in this distinct moment when they would be read popularly as documents. The role of the photograph as a document makes it even more important to consider the relationship between the entire body of work produced by the Historical Section (all of the photographs taken) as it relates to the popular view of the contents (images circulated). Circulation became a process through which subject identities were determined appropriate or inappropriate for the visual construction of the category “possible client.” In circulation, the FSA images were depicting possible client families under the connotation that these images also provided an illustration of rural America and Americans. The

FSA scrapbooks of circulated images illustrate that the rhetorical use of representative whiteness seen in *Toward Farm Security*, *The Farm Tenancy Report*, and office correspondence continues into the sphere of circulation for popular audiences-the nation. Additionally, through analysis of the RA/FSA Scrapbooks, I find that images of white bodies were circulated as representative (of client, deserving poor, US citizen) and in the few cases when images of Black, Mexican, or Japanese-American identified subjects appeared in papers they were almost always presented in specifically raced ways. The written requests for images of good, average, and representative farmers and families taken in tandem with the representation of families in circulated images for RA/FSA employees, government purposes, and popular media suggest that these terms did not only indicate the representation of rural, US families, but also indicated that those families should be white.

Conclusion

Within the completed FSA/OWI Photograph Collection, the representations of race are more varied than the circulated images might suggest. This brings me back to my original question. Why did the 1935 Migrant Mother take such a different trajectory than the 1936 Migrant Mother? So far we know that, based on correspondence and circulation trends, the possible client, moreover the “good client,” was a family. This family contained a good mother who was deemed capable of learning more modern ways to care for her family and bring them out of poverty. This good mother was white. I noted the Cherokee identity of Florence Thompson in the introduction chapter, but the caption applied to the 1936 Migrant Mother tells a story of race as well. The 1936 Migrant Mother was captioned, “Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California.” Based on my

findings, I would conclude that even though Dorothea Lange never stated that the subject in the 1936 Migrant Mother was Euro-American, not including any racial marker in the caption identified her to the audience as white. In review, I come to this conclusion because the circulated materials show all subjects identified as non-white racially labeled in some way. At the same time, the caption for the 1935 Migrant Mother takes on new meaning: “Mexican mother in California. ‘Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me ‘We don’t want to go, we belong here.’” (Note on Mexican labor situation in repatriation.)” The inclusion of racializing markers leaves this image, and the mother depicted, outside of the bounds of deserving poor, good mother, and possible client. This image, so similar to the icon, represents a body of depictions of mothers not selected for circulation during the life of the Historical Section.

Through multiple processes of selection and circulation, FSA images took on a central role in the visual representation and construction of those families who would be imagined as possible or representative clients. Fitting into this framework, of which whiteness was privileged if not requisite, meant that a family could be popularly imagined as rural, deserving poor. For the mother, this meant being framed as a good mother who was capable within the domestic sphere. Through education from the FSA, the good mother could learn “better ways of living” and eventually become self-sustaining.⁵⁴ Notably, the contents of the FSA File ranges in topic and representation more broadly than the contents of the circulated images suggest. But it is only through popular circulation that any FSA image could contribute to the construction of possible client.

DOUD: Could you give me some sort of evaluation of this file now—this group of pictures that were taken, and what part you think they play in our cultural life today? Do

⁵⁴ Gaer, *Toward Farm Security: The Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration*.

they have any value other than an historical value?

TUGWELL: I wouldn't be able to say about that, because I don't know anything about aesthetic theory and I am not an artist. To me, they are very tender and touching things—very sensitively done. To me it is still marvelous that a fellow like Rothstein would sit a woman in a doorway and tell such a big story—that is a genuine artist who can do that. It is the kind of touch that Wyeth has. He paints someone at a window, and a flower, and you see the whole world in it.

Tugwell and Doud's discussion of the File, specifically, the idea that one photograph had the capacity to depict "the whole world," is one that resonates with the material condition of Lange's 1936 *Migrant Mother*. The 1936 *Migrant Mother* survives as the whole window, flower, and world of rural America in the Great Depression. The "Migrant Mother" is the lasting, iconic representation of the possible client. The image-caption pairs were imbued with an affective truth-value. Modern photography claimed, through the use of straight photographic methods (sharp focus, direct angles, little if any manipulation), the ability to produce objective images. The truth-value circulating through the images represented by the FSA disallowed the possibility of imagining what existed outside of the frame, or what existed in the frames that were not popularly reproduced. Instead the images "within the frame" were read as the entirety of deserving rural poverty in the US and in this case, the whole truth was framed and continues to be framed almost exclusively as white.

Chapter 3 has established the dominant trends in FSA image circulation of families. It also illuminates the historically specific salience of the 1936 *Migrant Mother* image. In chapter 4, I work to interrogate those who were left outside of the frame. Exclusion from circulation left women read as Mexican in the US marginalized from the national imagination of possible client. By leaving those read as Mexicans in the US out of the frame, all Mexicans in the US were excluded from the categories it defined: deserving poor, good mother, and US citizen. Chapter 4 presents the national racializing and gendered discourses as they intersect with FSA

photographic representation of Mexicans in the US. By looking specifically at non-circulated representations of mothers, I ask how the representations differ from those in circulated images and what this can tell us about the trajectory of the 1935 Migrant Mother.

CHAPTER 4. BEYOND THE FRAME: ERASING THE RACIALIZED OTHER

Tugwell's only advice to me, only direction to me—He never said how to take them. He said, "Remember,"—and this is the only thing that I can remember— "remember that the man with the holes in his shoes, the ragged clothes, can be just as good a citizen as the man who has the better shoes and the better clothes."¹

Stryker to Doud

In the early twentieth century, the dominant narratives of modernism and progress defined good motherhood as a criterion for citizenship and for differentiating between the deserving and undeserving poor. For Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, the discourses of both motherhood and poverty constructed them outside the possibility of assimilation and citizenship. In the context of the experience of rural poverty during the Depression, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) was developed to implement rehabilitation programs for suffering farm families. The FSA defined possible client families based on constructions of good motherhood and the deserving poor. The rhetorics of motherhood and poverty intersect and inform racializations of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans during the Depression; these rhetorics also result in the exclusion of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans from citizenship, assimilation, and as a result, from the possibility of federal help.

Chapter 3 demonstrates the processes through which potential clients were constructed in circulated FSA images of rural mothers. This visual construction of the possible client aligned with FSA criteria associating possible clienthood with deserving poor and good mothers. However, the visual construction of the possible client is also almost entirely Anglo in appearance. The 1935 Migrant Mother and the 1936 Migrant Mother (fig. 1.1, fig 1.2) remain touchstones as this chapter works to consider those images which were not popularly circulated during the life of the photographic unit. This chapter analyzes the space beyond the popular

¹ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker.

frame in order to illuminate the general absence of the 1935 Migrant Mother from popular memory. Specifically, I use an intersectional framework and examine discourses of race, gender, and poverty. I consider discursive constructions of Mexicans as a shifting racial project that intersects with constructions of women, particularly mothers, and of poverty as a raced and gendered category. In order to more fully understand the Photographic File of the FSA as an archive that had material, lived, and discursive implications during the time it was built and first disseminated, This chapter asks whether and how Mexicans in the US were rendered by the FSA photographic unit. I ask the following questions: Were photographs of Mexicans made? How were people of Mexican descent represented in FSA photographs? Do these representations reflect or reinforce national racial constructions of Mexicans?

Historical Context: Racialization of Mexicans in the US

In order to historically contextualize FSA photography, this chapter presents the archive in relation to historically specific national rhetorics of race, gender, and poverty. This section focuses on the policies that shaped the construction of Mexicans in the US during the first 30 years of the twentieth century. In the years leading to the Depression, through the implementation of immigration, work, and health policies, Mexicans in the US were constructed to varying extents as a race that was distinctly not white; as a population at once desired as a source of low wage labor and rejected as contagious, racially and biologically inferior; and as a fecund threat to the identity of the Nation.

Depression era racialization of Mexicans in the United States was an amplification of decades of debate around the legal and racial classification of Mexicans. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo resulted in the annexation of much of what would become California, Texas,

Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado into the United States. According to the Treaty, those Mexican citizens who were living on annexed land could move south into Mexico or remain on the land, keep their property, and be classified as US citizens. In the years following the Treaty until 1930, Mexicans were legally classified as white but their presence as full social citizens was repeatedly challenged, threatened, and marginalized. Mexican disenfranchisement came in the form of school segregation, restrictive housing covenants resulting in segregated communities, low-wage labor, loss of land, physical threats, and forced “repatriation.”²

In the 1910s and 1920s, Mexican access to whiteness and citizenship was repeatedly contested; however, single, Mexican men were socially accepted in the US on the condition that they were only present as temporary, low-wage labor. Constructed as “birds of passage,” Camille Guerin-Gonzales explains that Mexican immigrants were imagined as transient workers who would come and then leave. As with birds of passage, it was believed biology would always drive Mexican laborers to return to Mexico. Constructing Mexicans as birds of passage undergirded the argument that Mexican migrants were low risk to the United States. “They did not tend to settle down, join unions, naturalize, or vote.”³ At this time, Mexicans could migrate fairly freely because their labor was desired throughout the southwest and the presence of their bodies was not read as a national threat, or was less threatening than other racialized immigrant groups.

Between 1914 and 1924 several race based immigration quotas were considered and

² Paul Theobald and Ruben Donato, “Children of the Harvest: The Schooling of Dust Bowl and Mexican Migrants During the Depression Era,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 67, no. 4 (1990): 29–45.

³ Camille Guerin Gonzales. *Mexican Workers and the American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939*. Rutgers University Press, 1994. 492.

supported by restrictionists who lobbied for quotas based on nativist fears.⁴ Restrictionists and anti-restrictionists deployed the same essentializing rhetoric to ground their arguments for or against the presence of Mexicans in the US. Farmers in the southwest (anti-restrictionists) argued for the support of Mexican labor for two principle reasons. First, without Mexican labor, they would have to raise wages for “normal [white] workers.” The farmers argued that “they had an inherent right to Mexican labor, the growers fretted that the immigration restrictions would ruin them.”⁵ Second, as stated above, Mexicans were constructed as birds of passage that would not stay in the US and threaten social resources.⁶ While the argument of the anti-restrictionist supports Mexican immigration on the surface, the reasoning behind the support was distinctly dehumanizing and oppressive based on essentializing Mexicans as a low wage labor pool that was segregated and completely separate from white America. One anti-restrictionist argued that “labor out of Mexico was an issue of short-term economic necessity, not a matter of immigration at all.”⁷ In contrast, restrictionists “wanted to end Mexican immigration, arguing that farmers could and should pay higher wages and hire local [white] workers year round.” While anti-restrictionists and restrictionists relegated Mexicans in the United States to existing primarily as a source of temporary labor, the restrictionists also argued Mexicans as a threat to white worker survival. Both arguments framed Mexicans as unassimilable, alternative sources of low wage labor.⁸ Neither restrictionists nor anti-restrictionists present citizenship or assimilation as a

⁴ John Weber, “Homing Pigeons, Cheap Labor, and Frustrated Nativists: Immigration Reform and the Deportation of Mexicans from South Texas in the 1920s,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2013): 167–86.

⁵ Ibid. 170.

⁶ Fuller 1940.

⁷ Weber, “Homing Pigeons, Cheap Labor, and Frustrated Nativists.” 178.

⁸ Philip L. Martin, *Promise Unfulfilled: Unions, Immigration and the Farm Workers* (Cornell University Press, 2003). 43.

possibility for Mexicans working and living in the US.

Although restriction of Mexicans was debated, ultimately the Immigration Act of 1917 did not place quotas on Mexican immigration. Restrictionists responded to the lack of quotas by working to disseminate discourse and pass policy that would construct Mexicans as a biologically inferior racial group. In 1916 the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) commissioned Claude C. Pierce to organize public health service exhibits in California and later with “overseeing the modernization” of disinfection plants. Early in 1917, Pierce determined and announced the need for an “‘iron-clad quarantine’ against every body entering the United States from Mexico.”⁹ The disinfection plant was implemented to eradicate suspected sources of disease. Historian Alexandra Minna Stern stresses that while Ellis Island implemented disinfection procedures on a case-by-case basis when evidence of disease presented, medicalization of the Mexican border was integrated into the standard immigration process. Standard disinfection procedures involved “forced nudity and totalizing disinfections [which] continued into the late 1920s, long after the typhus panic had subsided.”¹⁰ While not a quota system, the border quarantine had national effects beyond the border; as Stern argues “it helped to racialize inhabitants of Mexico as *Mexicans*.” It also “brought into public discourse many of the notions of disease, blood and hereditary inferiority that would become central to the vocabulary of immigration restrictionists in the 1920s.”¹¹

The works of eugenicists like David S. Jordan, Charles Goethe, and Laughlin circulated nativist theories of Mexicans as diseased and biologically inferior into the national imaginary—

⁹ Alexandra Minna Stern, “Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the Us-Mexico Border, 1910-1930,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 1999, 41–81. 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

this image of Mexicans contributed to popular support for the Restrictionist Platform.¹² The eugenics movement disseminated arguments tied to racial inferiority and biology. David S. Jordan wrote, “The Mexican peon, who for the most part can never be fit for citizenship...is giving our stock a far worse dilution than ever came from Europe.”¹³ Charles Goethe in the magazine story, “The Influx of Mexican Amerinds,” argued that “from a sanitation standpoint [the Mexican peon is] a menace. He not only does not understand health rules: being a superstitious savage, he resists them.”¹⁴ Such reports implicate the Mexican population as contagion, targeting all based on race rather than evidence of symptoms. Historian George Sanchez notes that “*Americans* [my emphasis] objected to the presence of Mexican children in public schools for fear that their own children would catch a contagious disease.”¹⁵ The Mexican population in the US was increasingly essentialized as a biologically distinct group, racially inferior, prone to disease and likely to become public charge.

The eugenics movement and restrictionist arguments supported the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act which placed caps on Southern and Eastern European immigrants, resting on claims that America’s racial stock was at risk. Due to pressure from anti-restrictionists and farming lobbies, the 1924 Act did not specifically place a quota on Mexican immigrants. However, during the same year US Border Patrol was established, making passage more arduous, and criminalizing crossing into the US without authorization. Although Mexican labor was still desired at the time, the 1924 Immigration Act, through application of head taxes, visa

¹² Stern, “Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood.”

¹³ Ibid. Qtd. Jordan to Davenport, 1 June 1925, APS, Davenport Papers, ms. B:D27.

¹⁴ Ibid., 76.

¹⁵ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 102. See also Theobald 32.

fees, literacy tests, and the broadly applied restrictions against anyone ‘likely to become public charge,’ created a cumbersome legal entry process that many elected to avoid by entering through alternative routes. Not alone in his claim, historian Weber states “The 1924 law proved especially important in encouraging unauthorized entry, particularizing the ‘prototypical illegal alien’ as Mexican and fashioning law enforcement’s reaction to these supposed threats to national sovereignty.”¹⁶ As we will see, subsequently, the nativist focus shifted from constructions of single Mexican men to a focus on women and children. Post-1924, in the years leading to the Depression, Mexicans were no longer read as birds of passage but as ‘illegal’ and biologically prone to disease.

The rise in racial animus toward Mexicans occurred at the intersection of two tangible social changes: national economic collapse and the rise in second generation and permanent settlement of Mexican families (viewed as more inassimilable bodies). With the onset of economic depression and widespread poverty, nativism materialized through a “‘hire Americans first’ approach by employers who often assumed that all Mexicans were foreign born.”¹⁷ Historian Natalia Molina argues, “The collapse of the US economy triggered a dramatic change in the treatment of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Their marginal acceptance that had stemmed from their being a source of cheap labor disappeared as rapidly as the jobs they had been hired to fill.”¹⁸ Jobs, in general, were in short supply and prioritized for “Americans first” in a historical moment where Mexican-Americans were more likely to be read as deportable non-citizens, than to be given jobs or social support as full social citizens. Moreover, the rise in

¹⁶ Weber, “Homing Pigeons, Cheap Labor, and Frustrated Nativists.” 176.

¹⁷ Molina. *Fit to be Citizens*. 121.

¹⁸ Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*, vol. 38 (Univ of California Press, 2013).

second generation and permanent Mexican families (many of whom were US citizens) posed Mexican labor as more threatening than in decades past. Restrictionists and outspoken eugenicists argued that the presence of Mexican women introduced a hyper fertile threat to the racial stock of the Nation. Goethe warned, ““They [Mexican laborers] bring their women, their children”” adding that Mexicans were ““a group that is most fecund.””¹⁹ Further, immigration restrictionists argued that Mexican women were likely to have many children and both the women and children were likely to need care in relation to medical and other social services. Not only were Mexican women objectified as racially weak stock likely to produce many disease spreading bodies (due to fecundity) but they were marginalized from citizenship as a drain on social systems that needed to focus on “American” citizens in need. Fear of race suicide as a result of Mexican birth rates spread through statements like, “the menial laborers of today produce the citizens of tomorrow.”²⁰ Zoologist and eugenicist Samuel Holmes also warned, “Three out of every eight babies born were Mexican.”²¹ Through statements like Holmes’ all Mexicans were imagined as ‘aliens,’ blamed for the lack of jobs, and accused of straining social systems. The dominant image became one of a cheap laborer whose value as a worker was outweighed by his family’s cost to public health and social services. Such discourses cast all Mexican women in the US as determining factors in the poverty of their families and as national threat.

To combat the perceived threats posed by Mexican families in the US, the US Bureau of Immigration instituted mass “repatriation” of Mexicans to Mexico from 1929 and 1937. Within

¹⁹ Ibid. cites Goethe, “Other Aspects of the Problem”

²⁰ Samuel J. Holmes, “Perils of the Mexican Invasion,” *North American Review* 227 (May 1929): 615-23) quoted in Molina. *Fit to Be Citizens*. 125

²¹ Molina. *How Race is Made in America*. 83.

their work, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, explain that while this period was officially referred to as “repatriation,” a California State Senate Committee determined in 2003 that “unconstitutional emigration” and “coerced emigration” are more accurate terms.²² Those who were read as deportable aliens were encouraged to leave “voluntarily.” Balderrama and Rodríguez specify that, “even those individuals who left ‘voluntarily’ did so because of legal coercion and fear generated by anti-Mexican hysteria.”²³ “Voluntary” departures were encouraged because they saved the State legal and transportation costs. “Voluntary repatriation was the return of aliens of their own volition, for whatever reason. Homesickness, the opportunity to participate in a new agrarian reform program in Mexico, the failure to find employment, the acquisition of wealth or the inability to obtain it were all factors in the Mexicans decision to return to Mexico.”²⁴ Many of the categories that fall under “voluntary repatriation” have racialized and gendered components that suggest coercion. Discourses of race and gender left Mexicans largely unable to access forms of social citizenship that included community building, employment, or help from the FSA. Additionally, some families that did not want to repatriate were pressured and threatened with loss of social support or “threats of bodily harm if they did not leave.”²⁵

By constructing the Mexican family as biologically inferior and focusing on poor health, lack of sanitation, low intelligence, and excessive fertility, “the ‘draining public resources’ narrative was effectively used to rationalize expulsion, with social workers and relief agencies

²² Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (UNM Press, 2006),

²³ Balderrama and Rodríguez. *Decade of Betrayal*. 305.

²⁴ Hoffman. *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression*. 138.

²⁵ Balderrama and Rodríguez. *Decade of Betrayal*. 305.

taking an active role in enforcement, targeting women and families.”²⁶ Hospitals, clinics, and schools were also sites of enforcement, all of which are also central sites for mothers and children. In March 1931, a raid took place in “El Paso public schools, resulting in the detention of more than 500 schoolchildren. Whole communities were uprooted as deportation rates continued to accelerate”²⁷ Sociologist Hondagneu-Sotelo argues that the focus was “not on labor and production but, rather, on the social reproduction of women, children, and families, and they targeted public assistance and social welfare... The restrictionists targeted women and children first because they were perceived as the primary indicators of settlement and demographic transition.”²⁸ Hondagneu-Sotelo’s argument speaks to the placement of Mexicans as excluded from citizenship regardless of legal status. Her claim that women and children were targets because they served as “indicators of settlement” suggests that previous acceptance of male Mexicans as temporary low wage laborers were contingent on them never attempting to claim space in the social fabric of the US.

Targeting women and children for repatriation reflects the nativist fears that the Mexican presence (in any form) threatened the racial purity of the Nation. Moreover, it centered around women’s bodies as sites of reproduction and reinforced constructions of Mexicans as racially distinct and biologically inferior. Edythe Tate-Thompson of the California State Board of Health argued that Mexicans were more likely to contract and spread tuberculosis due to their weak biological makeup.²⁹ This type of argument presented the Mexican body as racially inferior and

²⁶ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, “Women and Children First,” *Socialist Review* 25 (1995): 169–90. 176.

²⁷ Weber, “Homing Pigeons, Cheap Labor, and Frustrated Nativists.” 184.

²⁸ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, “Feminism and Migration,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 571, no. 1 (2000): 107–20. 118.

²⁹ Molina. Fit to be Citizens. 121.

contagious—all of which enforced support for targeted federal deportation policies.³⁰ Molina argues that the image of the Mexican as “sick and diseased” was used as a primary reason for their deportation and for “constructing them as outside US social membership.”³¹ She shows that being read as Mexican meant one was understood as diseased and being diseased was grounds for deportation. Thus, all Mexicans were stripped of full citizenship rights (regardless of their actual status), at risk for deportation, and excluded from social programs. Sotelo and Molina’s arguments, regarding the discursive justification of repatriation, gesture to processes of racializing Mexicans as excluded from the possibility of citizenship. In the end, the repatriation resulted in the coerced emigration of approximately 400,000 people identified as Mexican “of which half are estimated to have been US citizens.”³² By racializing Mexicans in the US as Other, inferior, and unassimilable, federal repatriation appeared to be a logical step, taken by the State, to best protect its *citizens*³³ in an economic depression. However, Hoffman notes that “even after the massive federal relief programs of the New Deal were begun in 1933, cities...still attempted to persuade indigent Mexicans to leave.”³⁴ The federal repatriation materialized as the threat of deportation for anyone who was identified as Mexican regardless of citizenship. This process left anyone of Mexican descent excluded from protections of citizenship.

Additionally, 1930 census categories changed and “Mexican” was added as a separate racial category. “The addition of the category *Mexican*—which conflated “race” with nation—to

³⁰ Ibid. 135.

³¹ Ibid. 137.

³² Ngai, Minna Stern.

³³ “Citizens” is italicized here to denote the construction of citizenship during the repatriation as limited and contingent on one’s identity as not Mexican.

³⁴ Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (VNR AG, 1974), 130.

the 1930 United States census, must be viewed in this dual light, formed by and through eugenic, medicalized, and statistical knowledges about human bodies and identities.”³⁵ The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which granted citizenship to all Mexicans living in US territory post annexation now stood in conflict with constructions of Mexicans as not-white, and based on racial definitions, not citizens.³⁶

FSA Client Criteria: Deserving Poor and Contingent Whiteness

Social recognition of widespread rural poverty in the Midwest during the 1920s and into the Depression became a national project of the New Deal. Poverty, a state previously imagined as the result of individual weakness and as specific to urban space, was reframed by the Great Depression and New Deal Politics. Seventy eight percent of the country’s rural population was experiencing poverty³⁷ and programs for federal relief and rehabilitation were established to resolve it. Developed for the purpose of lessening rural poverty, the FSA’s objectives included the “immediate” improvement of “health, housing, sanitation and diet,” reduction of debt, reduction of migrant workers by tying workers to land, and education of sustainable practices to farm families.³⁸ The existing social hostility towards those in poverty was complicated by such reformer approaches to poverty. Reforming discourses around poverty generally distinguished between those considered deserving poor (deserving of charity and social support) and those

³⁵ Stern, “Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood.” 52.

³⁶ Molina argues that this distinction acts as material evidence of the scapegoating of Mexicans for the Depression era collapse of the US economy. If a person taking the census was born in the US and an American citizen, but parents were born in Mexico, that person was counted as Mexican and as a race distinct from either white or black.

³⁷ Gaer, *Toward Farm Security: The Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration*.

³⁸ *Toward Farm Security* 63.

deemed undeserving. As such, the rhetoric of pauperism³⁹ remained to define those in chronic poverty as immoral, dangerous, and personally weak. They were responsible for their poverty. This class of criminalized poor was considered undeserving of help and unlikely to be capable of rehabilitation.⁴⁰ The population of the deserving poor became the face of the FSA, both photographically and in writing. Differentiating itself from relief, the Farm Security Administration was described as primarily assisting “those needy farm families which, upon receiving such help, can reasonably be expected to become self-sustaining at some future date.”⁴¹ The expectation of the family’s ability to self-sustain came from the popularly imagined rural American farm life, as one where hard work could provide a comfortable life.⁴² Becoming a client of the FSA hinged on fulfilling several criteria, many of which gesture towards the selection of those considered deserving poor rather than the rehabilitation of all families suffering from poverty.

Toward Farm Security outlines the goals of the FSA as a project that aimed not to help all people who were experiencing rural poverty during the Depression, but only those who could be successfully rehabilitated (based on FSA criteria). While the programs may have been popularly understood as grant assistance, the FSA required participation in both education and acquiescence to supervision. The differentiation between those who could or could not become FSA clients is not a clear demarcation. Much of the decision was left to the FSA County Supervisors who would conduct interviews with applicant families. The process was described as

³⁹ Finnegan 7.

⁴⁰ Neil Betten. “American Attitudes toward the Poor: A Historical Overview,” *Current History* 65 (July 1973).i

⁴¹ Gaer, *Toward Farm Security: The Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration*. 61.

⁴² *Ibid.* 1.

follows, “From the answers the interviewer will try to determine the chances of the applicant’s rehabilitation. While the interview is in progress, the interviewer, often without realizing it, establishes certain prejudices against or in favor of the applicant. More in the general behavior of the applicant than in what he tells about himself and his needs.”⁴³ As an official part of the handbook from which regional FSA staff learned about their positions, the above excerpt establishes general impressions of a family’s behavior as grounds for determining qualification.

Toward Farm Security outlines markers of poverty including “poor housing [this includes clutter of people or belongings]; inadequate and insufficient food; poor health; lack of educational opportunities; and a loss of hope and faith bred of despair.”⁴⁴ While there is no mention of whiteness as a requirement, several of the criteria render Mexican families largely ineligible as a result of racializing discourses circulating at the time. Applicants were required to show evidence of five consecutive years of successful farming, they must be married, less than 45 years old and have enough healthy children⁴⁵ to perform necessary farm work. Additionally, all applicants were assessed for evidence of responsibility, good morals, no ideological misgivings, and a history of timely payment of all debts. Placed in context with the racial construction of Mexicans at the time as biologically inferior and prone to disease, those who were both living in rural poverty and read as Mexican would have faced a nearly impossible challenge in attempting to prove that they were deserving poor in the midst of a national rhetoric that marked their bodies as biologically and culturally predisposed to poor living conditions. FSA guidelines regarding healthy diets provide an example of racialized criteria. The foods

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 30.

⁴⁵ Jane Adams and D. Gorton, “This Land Ain’t My Land: The Eviction of Sharecroppers by the Farm Security Administration,” *Agricultural History* 83, no. 3 (July 1, 2009): 323–51. 341.

considered “good” included milk, meat, and bread; in contrast, tortilla, rice and other foods associated with non-Anglo populations were deemed inappropriate and connected to poor health, inefficient work, and poor family morale.⁴⁶ The symptoms of poverty were simultaneously functioning as central characteristics to the racialization of an entire group of people. It seems that those marked by the racializing discourse would be excluded from the category deserving poor. Additionally, Mexican families would not be likely to qualify as clients because instead of classifying as deserving poor, their poverty would be read as the result of race, considered biologically determined rather than changeable through education.

Although limited by a black-white paradigm like much of the literature on race and Depression era rehabilitation programs, Adams and Gorton’s work provides evidence of segregation and racism within the FSA client criteria. They note racial segregation and disproportionate numbers of white clients as evidence:

In the South, the FSA tried to recruit African American and white tenants and sharecroppers as settlers in numbers proportionate to their numbers in the 1930 census. The agency, however was sensitive to local opinion and did not locate ‘negro projects’ where ‘leading citizens’ did not support them. This resulted in far more white than black clients participating in all phases of the program—as Rural Rehabilitation clients, on FSA community projects, and as tenant purchase borrowers.⁴⁷

Additionally, Black communities were uprooted by the FSA and replaced with white families who were taken on as clients at FSA funded rehabilitation communities.⁴⁸ Adams and Gorton find that Black tenant families were found unfit more frequently than white. Their research points to the existence of race-based criteria and suggests that whiteness was a preference if not a requirement of client families and implicates the exclusion/marginalization of all racialized

⁴⁶ Gaer, *Toward Farm Security: The Problem of Rural Poverty and the Work of the Farm Security Administration*. 101.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 329

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 334-335

families.

Agents in Modernizing: The Role of Good Mothers

FSA goals were informed by New Deal modernizing discourses which Adams and Gorton define as “a complex process whereby a relatively specific set of assumptions and behaviors make other assumptions and behaviors ‘wrong,’ both morally and pragmatically.”⁴⁹ These assumptions rationalized race and gendered based criteria under the guise of nationalistic modernizing approaches. Much of the surveillance and education of families on FSA assistance focused on the success of mother figures that could discursively qualify as good mothers.

The model of good motherhood derives from the broader maternalist movement which historian Gwendolyn Mink describes as made up of female welfare reformers who framed new standards of “Anglo-Americanized domestic motherhood.”⁵⁰ In the early twentieth century, FSA rehabilitation became conditional on a mother’s successful maintenance of the home, diet, and child rearing based on modernist, consumerist⁵¹ ideals. The mother’s role in the family then became to educate the family about “American standards” which would result in assimilation that would lead her family out of poverty. The maternalist movement generally argued that poverty could be taught out of families through mothers and “operated from the premise that social mediation of mother’s cultures, behaviors, and choices will enable poor, ethnic women and children to escape the effects of poverty.”⁵² Not all mothers and subsequently not all families were considered educable from the maternalist perspective. The maternalist movement placed

⁴⁹ Adams and Gorton 323.

⁵⁰ Mink, “The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942. vii.

⁵¹ see Coleman for the connection between modernist and consumerist motherhood

⁵² Mink 66.

boundaries around good motherhood; some “types” of families were “outside the boundaries of domesticity.”⁵³ Mink discusses the difference in possibility for assimilation through motherhood provided to European immigrant families in contrast to families considered uneducable,

According to the 1922 Children’s Bureau Conference on Mothers’ Pensions, even in states that claim to use standard family budgets welfare workers often assigned lower benefits to recipients from “lesser” nationalities: Czechs, Italians, Mexicans, African-Americans. Mothers Pension programs thus reinforced ties between culture, race, and poverty.⁵⁴

The maternalist movement provided a newly individualistic path by which to escape poverty and to access citizenship and potentially whiteness. However, the racialization of Mexicans as biologically inferior and culturally unassimilable placed them on the periphery of the “help” and social resources provided by the maternalist movement.

Disqualification from maternalist-related resources came to have a deeper and broader meaning for families experiencing rural poverty during the Depression, as the maternalist movement informed (directly or as the hegemonic cultural discourse of the time) the development of the FSA client rehabilitation requirements. Historian Amanda Coleman argues that in the context of the FSA, the maternalist movement marginalized women’s labor, reinforced strict gender roles and relegated women to the home. Within rural space there existed a history and expectation that women would take part in farm labor during certain seasons but based on the maternalist model, wage-earning women were read as failed mothers. Coleman finds that the FSA’s maternalist-minded policies specifically implicated white women who (through photographs) came to “embody the new, modern South which was being created under

⁵³ Mink 51.

⁵⁴ Mink 52.

the auspices of the FSA.”⁵⁵ Coleman argues that such targeted embodiment rendered white women as the sole bearers of the burden of rehabilitation. The photographic construction through circulated images of white women within domestic space reified their identities as necessarily centered on mothering. The exclusion of Mexican women and families from the circulated images left Mexican mothers outside of the frame and excluded them from the category modern mother. Additionally, members of Mexican families were not seen as part of what Coleman calls “the new modern South.”⁵⁶

While the domestic sphere was targeted as a site through which to identify poverty, it was also a site marked fixable through the education of the mother. The project delineated families who could qualify for FSA support through a structured image of deserving poor (those who were good mothers, citizens and could be educated). As mentioned in chapter 3, *Towards Farm Security* indicates that some cases would be hopeless in terms of education, “Adults who do not understand their plight...cannot be rehabilitated. They cannot become self-sustaining.”⁵⁷ The discourse circulating around the Mexican body depicted the population as one that the FSA would likely have deemed impossible to rehabilitate. As Molina argues, “Los Angeles public health officials reversed their assimilation policies during the Depression and argued that Mexicans’ biological inferiority precluded any possibility of rehabilitation.”⁵⁸ Mexican dispossession was predicated on the construction of Mexicans as racially predisposed to poverty, and incapable of assimilation: both are categories that rendered anyone who was read as Mexican

⁵⁵ “Rehabilitating the Region: the New Deal, Gender and the remaking of the Rural South”, Coleman (2010) 203.

⁵⁶ Coleman’s work reflects a historiography of the FSA that discusses depression era poverty in terms that maintain the marginalization of Mexican (American)s from the story.

⁵⁷ Gaer 91

⁵⁸ Molina 114

as ineligible clients in the eyes of the FSA.

In Rexford Tugwell's, *American Economic Life*, he discusses rates of working rural mothers in terms of race; "In each county covered in a recent investigation more than one half the white mothers and 85% of the Negro mothers had done fieldwork at sometime during the preceding year. Such work involves many hours away from home, hurriedly prepared meals, and a tax on the mother strength... Yet, the majority of the mothers in the study who did fieldwork had children under six years of age."⁵⁹ Presented from a black-white paradigm, this excerpt provides helpful but limited information. While Tugwell does not speak directly to the experience of Mexican mothers in rural US farm work, he does provide an assessment of women's work from a perspective of judgment that intuits poor mothering. Tugwell, the FSA, and the maternalist movement conceived of working women as poor mothers which informed popular readings of Mexican mothers in the US. While the body of the white mother became central to the visual depiction of deserving poverty and good motherhood, the Mexican woman was also central to constructing poverty. Visual representations of Mexican mothers reinforced racializations of Mexicans in the US through limited representations and lack of popular circulation. Mexican mothers were either invisible or represented as poor mothers. Dominant constructions of Mexican women as biologically inferior were tied to the rhetoric of hyper-fertility declaring Mexican women as vehicles for spreading disease by producing many diseased children. For the white appearing family, illness or having many children would have likely qualified the family as deserving poor. Many children were considered a strength of the potential client family because they were thought to secure the future of the farm. Illness was considered fixable through the institution of modernized living conditions and health care. In contrast, for

⁵⁹ American Economic Life. 88.

Mexican families in the US, the same categories would have been likely positioned as proof of the veracity behind dominant racializing discourses, constructing all Mexicans in the US as undeserving poor.

The Invisible Collection: FSA Images of Mexicans in the United States

The remainder of this chapter considers the contents of FSA images which identify subjects as Mexican. I ask how the depictions of Mexican motherhood reinforce or challenge national discourses of race and gender. I present this information through a broad content analysis of the photographic frames tagged as “Mexican” with no variants within the Library of Congress FSA digital archive.⁶⁰ I also conduct a close analysis of images representative of trends that emerged from the coding process. The search within the LOC FSA digital archive for the term “Mexican” yields 998 frames. The tag “Mexican” originates from caption content assigned to the image. There are other images, often taken before or after the frame yielded by the term ‘Mexican,’ that may not come up through this targeted search. Surrounding images may not emerge in the search results if the image was never captioned or the image was killed. Because the process for captioning was not perfect, there are images from early project years included in the 998, which have a caption and a hole punch, denoting that they were killed. Although the 998 images included in this analysis are many but not all of the frames that contain Mexican bodies, I limited my search only to those images which were in some way connected to the term “Mexican” because these are frames that contain subjects that were identified by the photographer or office as Mexican.

⁶⁰ LOC has the most comprehensive collection of FSA images and related materials.

My goal in approaching the 998 images was to ascertain trends within the collection, specifically regarding the representation of Mexican mothers in the US or images that suggest Mexican motherhood. I approached the 998 in order to consider the photographic representations, however limited, as they intersect with cultural discourses and FSA criteria of good mothers, possible clients, and deserving poverty. I developed coding categories based on the FSA client criteria. These are the same categories I used to consider the representation of mothers within the circulated images in chapter 3. As I discussed in the introduction chapter, I determined whether an image contains meanings connected to any of the coding categories by considering the image and caption as a pair because, as seen in chapter 2, the meanings of the images are made in conjunction with their captions. The categories for coding the 998 include “external space,” “landscape,” “domestic space,” “how many bodies are included in the image,” and a breakdown within that category of how many men, women, and children are included.

I also account for whether or not the caption implies that more bodies are shown and are actually in the frame. This category developed because there is a set of images in which the captions or composition reference the contents as containing many Mexican bodies. In these cases there are only a few bodies actually included in the photographic frame, but the image-caption pair reinforces constructions of Mexican mothers as hyper-fertile. Other coding categories include “food” in order to consider representations of diet. “Dirt” and “clutter” are similar categories because both were considered evidence or characteristic of a home in poverty (on the other hand, a well-organized, clean home was read as evidence of a successful mother and a healthy family). Examples of the latter are shown in the progress photographs discussed in chapter 3. The FSA rehabilitation program circulated this type of image as evidence of the program’s success in teaching mothers about better ways to organize, plan meals, and clean. I

included the category “health” and a separate category “death.” The category “health” accounts for discussions of illness and disease while “death” includes those images that are specifically about dying and includes several sets of images of graveyards marked “Mexican.” In addition to illness and disease, I include the categories “water” and “privy” because clean water and indoor plumbing denoted health while outdoor plumbing and contaminated water marked environments as blighted by disease. The privy category was added separately from the water category because privies were not only shown in Mexican sections of Mexican housing but were also marked as “Mexican privies.” They’re often shown in poor condition and there are multiple images that comment on the state of the privy as a potential source of disease. Discussion of water in Mexican images is very similar to discussion of privies; access to water and care of water is discussed as distinctly Mexican. Discussion of water is used as another means through which to connect Mexican bodies to disease.

The coded 998 images and captions provide a broad look at whether and how Mexicans were depicted. Mexicans were represented by the FSA photographic unit, but only in a very limited way. As a collection, the 998 represents only 0.59% of the 170,000 total negatives. This is, therefore, limited in perspective and representation. In contrast to the popularly circulated images considered in chapter 3, I consider the 998 frames as an invisible collection. For the most part, these photographic frames were not circulated. As an invisible collection, the 998 frames, while existing materially, were not doing the same work as the circulated images of white appearing motherhood. Images such as those produced in *Towards Farm Security* and *The Farm Tenancy Report* were read as objective representations of reality. The contents of the frame, all of the included circulated material, became reality- the entire picture of rural America. As a result, circulated FSA images and others like them precluded questions like “who else is

experiencing this?” or more literally, “what is beyond the frame?” Concealed from the national view, subjects identified as Mexican were not visually connected with the categories “deserving poor” or “possible client” through image circulation. The 998 functioned instead to reinforce existing exclusion of Mexicans in the US from full citizenship and as active discursive exclusion. Not circulating images of Mexicans in rural poverty reinforced their identities as not possibly US citizens, as having no place in the rural US.

In only two frames of the 998 are there subjects identified as clients. Neither of these includes a family unit. Both are distinctly non-mother and non-child. The first client is a single man, identified as a laborer. While he is still an unlikely client, he is single which removes the threat of children. The second client is an older couple. They are past the age of reproduction and do not appear to have any children living with them. Regardless, these two images are the exception, Mexican subjects are excluded from the categories “deserving poor” and “possible client” through limited visual depiction, captions, and absence from circulation, all of which reinforce national racializations of Mexicans in the US as non-citizens. It appears that race was a factor for determining whether a family was deemed capable of rehabilitation or relegated to inescapable poverty. In addition to erasure/exclusion, Mexicans were constructed as alien through limited representations within the images that were made. The FSA images reinforced racial hierarchies through the use of the “objective image.”

In this collection, I find the impact of both physical and visual erasure from the Nation. In addition to the violence committed by leaving Mexican mothers outside of a visual frame that delineated who deserved FSA client status, the content of the images also provides insight into how photographer approaches to depicting marginalized communities were informed by racializing discourses. The existence of the images provides evidence that there were Mexicans

experiencing rural poverty in the US during the Depression; however, the FSA photographs, as objective images were more likely to have been read as evidence of racial difference. The creation of photographic images for the FSA was not a clearly linear or hierarchical process. As shown in chapter 3, making the photograph came out of the needs of sometimes-contradictory sources, including Roy Stryker, the Historical Section Office, Washington, and media requests. These entities determined the themes and locations where FSA photographers would make pictures for the project. The invisible collection includes images made by Lange, Rothstein, Wolcott, and Lee. The majority of the images within the invisible collection focus on workers, external landscape (workspace, landscapes), or construction of the home. Initially these images seem irrelevant to understanding how Mexican mothers are depicted, but just as the absence of circulated images of Mexican mothers is informative so is the focus on workers and external space. Many of the images comment on the state of “Mexican housing” or on elements of construction as primitive. They include captions deeming the surroundings unclean, cluttered, and in some cases as disease prone based on proximity to ditches or failure to collect trash.

Based on the correspondence between Stryker and photographers in the field, the photographers were regularly rushing through assignments. Meanwhile they were receiving letters from Stryker regarding topics that they should or should not spend time photographing. There is evidence of not only covert but also overt “whitening” of the record. Stryker was the primary contact through which the photographers received directions. In one letter to Dorothea Lange, Stryker writes, “I would suggest that you take both black and white, but place the emphasis upon the white tenants, since we know these will receive much wider use”⁶¹ While Stryker makes no mention of Mexican bodies, Mexicans would not have been popularly

⁶¹ Stryker, Horvath, and University of Louisville, *Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972*. Stryker to Lange 6/18/37.

classified as white. The quote provides evidence of Stryker's understanding that the File was to be constructed in a certain way in regards to race, with a focus on those faces that would yield the most social support. The statement also points to how deeply marginalized rural Mexicans were. So much so that Stryker may not have found it relevant to tell his California based photographer how or whether to cover their plight.

I focus on the representation of mothers within the 998, but images of mothers do not make up the majority of the collection. If we know that depictions of mothers and motherhood (domestic space, children) were sought after for circulation, then in isolation, we might expect many varied depictions of Mexican mothers, including "before" and "after" images for progress reports and photo stories, but only 19.4% of the images had content connected to mothers and mothering. 30% of these images did not include a mother in the frame, but gestured to motherhood through the presence of children or domestic space. Of the depictions of Mexican mothers, there is no presence of the progress photography approach that was often requested by Stryker. There are no pictures that appear to qualify as "after" images, and thus any image that shows the family in poverty is not connected to the progress photography paradigm.

The majority of the invisible collection is made up of work images and images of external space. The depictions of the external state of "Mexican sections" provide a view of domestic life from a distance. These images could be made from the periphery of the community and more quickly than images that required the cooperation of human subjects. Photographing the outside of homes or worker in the fields would have been what I will refer to as a "low-stakes approach" because the photographer could take these images on the way to or from another assignment. The photographers could fairly easily access landscape views of communities or workers because both were public and visible upon passing. In comparison, a "high-stakes

approach” would require time gaining the trust and cooperation of human subjects. It might involve gaining permission to go inside the home or have the subjects sit for the photograph. The high-stakes approach would take more time in a job where they were driven to produce “good” content quickly. Thus, if images were going to be made of marginalized populations without taking time away from more desired images, work images and photographs of the outsides of homes would be among the easiest. Committing primarily to low-stakes approaches suggests a lack of interest in these communities and maintenance of literal and cultural distance between the photographer and the subject.

The majority of the frames by Lange, Wolcott, and Rothstein that address Mexican motherhood do so from a low-stakes approach. Importantly, their approach is the result of multiple external forces intertwined with their own photographic goals. At the same time, the images they produced should be read within the context of the historical moment. The FSA was very much concerned with representing good mothers as potential clients. Mexican mothers shown outside of domestic space would have been read not as successful modern mothers who were focusing on childcare and domesticity but as women whose primary function was that of field laborer. The Mexican mother depicted as laborer places her outside of the bounds of good motherhood. Images of children working in the fields present the mother, whether or not she is shown, as failing to properly care for her child. When the mother is absent from the frame, her absence accentuates her failure to shield her children from work. The first two images that I provide for close analysis are from the low-stakes images within the 998.

The first is Lange’s 1937 “Children of Mexican migratory field workers” (fig. 4.1) which shows Mexican children standing in a vast, windy field. Lange emphasizes their presence by placing the two children, embracing, in the center of the frame. On their own, this would result in

a conservative composition. By placing two more children on the right edge of the frame Lange creates the effect of fullness, busyness, and suggests more bodies than are shown. The audience is presented with a small child who is carrying another who appears only slightly smaller. This central child is performing the work of the absent mother. Given the dominant understanding of mothering at the time, the absence of the mother would be understood as failure. These two children approach two more young figures, one of which is cut in half by the frame. The image conveys a story of children who work or spend their days in the fields (depending on age). The fragmentation of the fourth child suggests that there are many more children like these.



FIGURE 4.1 “Children of Mexican migratory field workers”, by Dorothea Lange, 1937.

Showing children working alone and with their mothers also has the potential to remove the children from connection to the category child by reinforcing that all Mexicans, even if very

young, are laborers. The second example, Wolcott's 1939 image, "Mexican laborers on wagonload of cotton in field on Knowlton Plantation, Perthshire, Mississippi Delta, Mississippi" (fig. 4.2), includes an apparent mother figure in the foreground, hoisting cotton into a wagon. Within the wagon, we see four more subjects working. According to the caption, this is an image of "Mexican laborers," but upon examination we find at least two of the "laborers" in the wagon are young enough to classify as children. Images like this show mothers working with children, but do not address the status of the subjects as children or women during a project that was focused on teaching mothers better ways to care for their children—a foundation of which was to remain in the home. This approach suggests that racial discourses of Mexican families as outside of rehabilitation influenced how photographers conceived of the Mexican families that they did photograph.



FIGURE 4.2. Mexican laborers on wagonload of cotton in field on Knowlton Plantation, Perthshire, Mississippi Delta, Mississippi, by Marion Post Wolcott, 1939.

The other type of representation within the 998 is “high stakes” images, which focus on domestic space and, like the images of the laborer mother, reinforce and reflect racializations of Mexican mothers in the US. As an FSA client, the mother-figure (this could be an eldest daughter) was expected to take a central role in learning more modern ways of living regarding childcare, clutter, health, sanitation, and dietary needs. The FSA rehabilitation program’s approach through surveillance and education served to frame domesticity failures as a central cause of poverty. Domestic conditions perceived as evidence of poverty included houses that lacked modernizing elements including a sanitary privy, water piping, windows or window screens.⁶² Considered troublesome for any rural farm family, the absence of these modern features was deemed evidence of “remnant southern coloniality.”⁶³ Such social backwardness could lead to disease via water pollution, mosquitos, exposure to winter temperatures, and unsanitary conditions.⁶⁴ For rural Mexicans experiencing poverty in the US, these same elements (unsanitary privy, and lack water piping, windows or window screens) would not have been connected to the rehabilitatable state: “remnant southern coloniality.” Instead, a state of poverty would have been interpreted as evidence of the racially distinct state of the Mexican. While Okies exhibiting coloniality were imagined as capable of learning modern approaches to sanitation, Mexicans living in similar circumstances were imagined as permanently imbedded in those circumstances because of their racial identities.

The same themes of domesticity were presented in FSA photographs as evidence of poverty for both white and Mexican families. However, sickness, poor diet, and poor sanitation

⁶² Toward Farm Security 31.

⁶³ Coleman

⁶⁴ Toward Farm Security. 32.

were framed as resulting from a lack of resources and knowledge for white families. Whereas these same themes were seen as race based for Mexican families. Within the images of Mexican mothers and motherhood in domestic space from the 1998, prevailing themes include hyper-fertility, disease, and poor diet. Each of these themes also served as pivotal arguments within public health and political discourse focused on the racial inferiority of Mexicans. At the same time, the FSA focused on health, diet, and sanitation as tied to rehabilitating the deserving poor. The images within the domestic representations of the Mexican mother show her within the domestic space but still reinforce racializations of Mexican women as hyper-fertile and predisposed to disease as a result of biological and cultural inferiority. As discussed in chapter 3, white appearing families are generally depicted as deserving poor who could be educated. Their representations are varied; they are shown in images of stark poverty but also in images of rehabilitation and client success. In contrast, Mexican families are depicted in relation to similar issues (e.g. diet, dirt, health) in a singular way. The audience is not shown any “after” progress images, suggesting that they were not nor could not be “rehabilitated.”

The following section provides a close analysis of selected high stakes images from the 1998 in order to discuss the representations of Mexican mothers and motherhood in domestic space in depth. No single image can capture the entirety of the depictions represented within this invisible collection. The collection is the result of images taken over the course of the project by many photographers in varied geographic locations. As noted earlier, the majority of the photographers who took any photographs included in the 1998 took a low stakes approach for a multitude of reasons. However, the collection does include photographs of Mexican homes and families. Russell Lee, who spent extended periods during 1937, 1939 and 1941 in South Texas, made the majority of these. It is interesting that Russell Lee would have had access or permission

to spend time taking these images while it appears that other photographers for the most part did not. Lee was particularly close with Stryker. Within Stryker's papers, their letters to each other read like letters between friends. They joked and missed each other and after Stryker's work was completed with the RA/FSA they continued to work together. It seems that the bond between Lee and Stryker gave Lee latitude with assignments. Lee was also personally interested in Mexico and Mexicans.

He was married in Mexico City and wrote to Stryker, "[we] went on to Taxco a little colonial village of the type of about 200 years ago where we spent a few days. Then we came over to this section which is just about one of the most backward of all Mexico. This is certainly a wonderful country to travel in and to see. Have been so damned busy looking that I have taken about two pictures only. Am having a grand time trying to improve my Spanish-any improvement is a great step since I didn't know a damned thing about it when I arrived."⁶⁵ Lee's interest in Mexico may have led him to the assignments in South Texas and his close relationship with Stryker may have enabled Lee to spend extra time taking photographs of populations about which he had particular interest. Lee's contribution to the invisible collection provides the largest number of images of Mexican mothers and motherhood in domestic space; however as the themes from the coding indicate, the representation remains limited. It appears Lee was interested in "Mexico" as a romanticized, primitive space. While he endeavored to enter into the space and culture in a more invested way than other FSA photographers, his approach maintains the distance between his lens and his subject. I provide the following as examples of the prevailing trends in the domestic space images.

⁶⁵ Stryker, Horvath, and University of Louisville, *Roy Stryker Papers, 1912-1972*. Lee to Stryker January 4(?), 1939 Patzcuaro, Mich.

Within the domestic sphere, the mother was responsible for nourishing the family and keeping the home and children clean. *Toward Farm Security* outlines the types of nourishment that constituted “healthy foods.” This section concludes, “Poor housing and poor diets combine to produce poor health.”⁶⁶ As seen in figure 3.3, the FSA circulated images of what constituted appropriate diets and healthy spaces in which to consume food. Connecting poor diet to disease was the impetus for educating rehabilitation client families about better ways of eating and planning meals. Figure 4.3, “Mexican children eating lunch” is one example of how representations of meals and food in Mexican households reflect the racializations of Mexican mothers through representations of unsatisfactory diets. This photograph stands in contrast to the idealized family table depicted in the *Toward Farm Security*. Figure 4.3 frames two young boys eating at a table with no parents included in the frame. Additionally, the door is ajar and lacks a screen, to the right of a door is a pail for water—both details which were considered a threat to sanitation and linked to disease. The older child is holding rolled tortillas, an item that is not included on the healthy diet list and which was considered by some a step towards a life of crime and laziness.⁶⁷ The mother is not present in this image but it is an image about motherhood because it is about maintaining the home and caring for children. The mother’s failure is marked by her physical absence and her tendency to serve unacceptable foods.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 35.

⁶⁷ Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*. 102.



FIGURE 3.3 *Above*
A family at dinner, Coffee
County, Ala. Toward Farm
Security

FIGURE 4.3 *Left*
Mexican children eating lunch,
by Russell Lee, 1939.

Motherhood is also depicted through images that physically include the mother. Figure 4.4 is an example of those in the collection that connect Mexican bodies to dirt and by association to disease. It also exists in stark contrast to images like “Home in a Shack Village Occupied by Farm Laborers in the Middle West” (fig. 3.6) which was published in the *Farm Tenancy Report*. This image is similar in subject matter to figure 4.4. It depicts a woman sweeping the doorstep of a place defined in the caption as her “home.” In contrast, figure 4.4 does not contain the word “home” in the caption, a word that suggests ownership and belonging. In figure 3.6, the woman’s home is surrounded by cast off car parts and scraps, the FSA considered both clutter and dirt evidence of poverty. However, the caption places no overt comment on ability of the woman holding the broom to keep her home, which appears in poorer shape than that of the subject in figure 4.4. In the image of the white appearing subject, the audience is left with more possibility for varied interpretation.

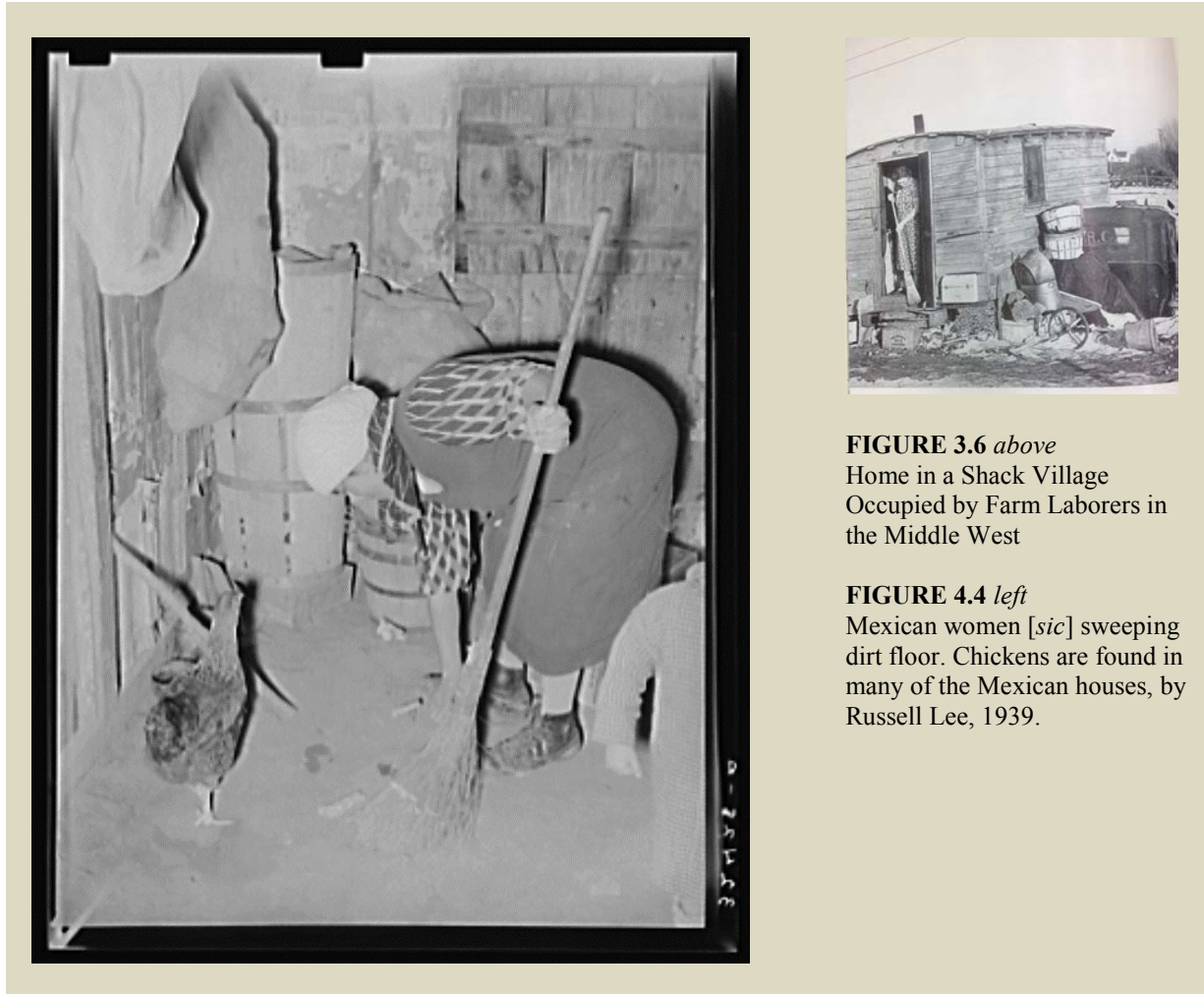


FIGURE 3.6 *above*
Home in a Shack Village
Occupied by Farm Laborers in
the Middle West

FIGURE 4.4 *left*
Mexican women [*sic*] sweeping
dirt floor. Chickens are found in
many of the Mexican houses, by
Russell Lee, 1939.

In Lee's "Mexican women [*sic*] sweeping dirt floor. Chickens are found in many of the Mexican houses," (fig. 4.4) he shows a woman in a cotton dress, holding a broom as she bends over to presumably pick up something while cleaning the room. The pose suggests tiring housework, but the caption notifies the viewer that there are, in fact, two main subjects in this image. The first is the woman sweeping, "Mexican women [*sic*] sweeping dirt floor" and the second is a chicken, "Chickens are found in many of the Mexican houses." Similarly, other photographs in the invisible collection also show birds in Mexican identified houses. In one case, Lee captioned an image, "Mexican with pigeon. The Mexicans are great lovers of birds." Beyond the essentializing connection to birds, it the cultural expectation, based on modern standards of

living that feed animals must be kept in coops and pens separate from the family home. It was argued that birds in the home would spread disease, comparably to bugs entering through windows. However, in one photograph of a white appearing man feeding a chicken inside his home, the caption explains that the presence of the bird is not a failure on the part of the man but a desperate (and uncommon) event due to harsh temperatures. Beyond the double standard of how images with chickens are captioned, I find a romanticized notion of “the Mexican” that reinforces and essentializes difference based on race.

Regarding figure 4.4, the focus of the viewer is drawn away from the apparent subject, the woman sweeping, and towards the chicken as racialized metonym for dirt and disease. The image changes from a depiction of a mother performing her expected duty within the household to an image about a home, which regardless of sweeping cannot be cleaned. The caption informs the viewer about the *fact* that “chickens are found in many Mexican houses.” This caption renders the woman’s attempt to sweep the floor inert; because the floor is “dirt,” which was deemed unacceptable construction by the FSA. Figure 4.4 generalizes about the state of all Mexican households in the US and of the ability of the Mexican mother to learn the mothering practices valued by the FSA. Within the context of other images of white mothers published in connection with deserving poverty and possible clients, the subject of “Home in a Shack Village Occupied by Farm Laborers in the Middle West” was more likely to be interpreted favorably. “Dirt” is not an innately biological category but it is a category denoted by the FSA and Tugwell to suggest the presence of disease. In the situation, where an FSA representative or photographer finds dirt in a “Mexican” household it would likely be interpreted within existing racial frameworks as evidence of disease that were not the result of deserving poverty but biological predisposition to illness.

Within figures 4.5 and 4.6 the Mexican body is marked as diseased through image content and caption. Figure 4.5 depicts a toddler exiting a privy while a woman in the right hand of the image facing away from the camera leans over a basin. Figure 4.6 depicts a child sleeping in bed. Only in figure 4.6 does the subject read as possibly ill. It could be argued that the subject appears to be sleeping; however, the caption suggests a specific reading and acts as closure on alternative interpretations. Within figure 4.5, “Mexican girl coming from privy, woman washing clothes,” the subjects are both interacting with spaces that were vulnerable to critique because they involved water and waste. This image is one of a series Lee made of privies; other frames include captions like, “Gardens planted close to privies. Mexican section, San Antonio, Texas. Possible source of typhoid”⁶⁸ and “Mexican privy. Robstown, Texas.”⁶⁹ These captions identify the privies as distinctly “Mexican” and in the case of the San Antonio image, Lee directly comments on the proximity between the gardens (as a source of food) and the privies (source of disease because of outdoor facilities) as a likely source of disease.

⁶⁸ Russell Lee, *Gardens Planted close to Privies. Mexican Section, San Antonio, Texas. Possible Source of Typhoid*, 1939, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa2000013704/PP/>.

⁶⁹ Russell Lee, *Mexican Privy. Robstown, Texas*, 1939, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa2000013455/PP/>.



FIGURE 4.5 Mexican girl coming from privy, woman washing clothes, by Russell Lee, 1939.

Figure 4.5, “Mexican girl coming from privy, woman washing clothes” does not state a link between the two subjects. However, concerns about clean water and indoor plumbing would indicate that Lee framed these two subjects to show proximity between washing processes and waste. The image suggests disease, which is exacerbated by the small child exiting the privy barefoot. Although a mother figure is in the frame, her back is to the child who becomes the body on which the viewer will focus. The child confronts the camera, looks up at it. She is tiny in this space and is framed by the privy, a source of disease. The mother figure in the background washes clothes, much like the woman in figure 4.4, to no avail.



FIGURE 4.6 Sick child in bedroom of house in the Mexican section. Seven children and two adults sleep in two small rooms and in two beds and on the floor in this house. They pay eleven dollars per month for three rooms, no bath, outside toilet, by Russell Lee, 1941.

Even when women are not present in the images their production of children is implicated because these images would have been read within the context of dominant gendered discourses. On its own, figure 4.6 might have suggested an ill or sleeping child to a popular audience. The frame shows a single, sleeping child in bed. Next to the child is a nightstand, which holds the remnants of food in a bowl, a glass of water, and a small bottle. There are flies on her sleeves and on the bowl. A central reason for the social focus on window screens, audiences would have likely read the flies as evidence of an unhealthy environment. When paired with the caption, possibility for interpretation narrows as the words tell the audience what is happening, and what is important. Moreover, the caption presents an abundance of narrative that the visual content does not suggest in any way. After reading the caption, the child is no

longer imagined alone because “seven children and two adults sleep in two small rooms and in two beds and on the floor in this house.” The caption reinforces the racialization of the Mexican mother as fecund and of the Mexican family as diseased. Not only is the child described as “sick” but the caption suggests that there are many more, potentially ill, children living in close quarters with the one pictured.

The trend in captions of images related to Mexican motherhood, which suggested more bodies than were included in the frame, reinforced and reflected the construction of Mexican mothers as fecund. It did so through the production of a collection of images that suggested that Mexican families had so many members they could not be possibly fit into a single picture. Like figure 4.6, figure 4.7 reinforced the dominant construction of Mexican mothers as likely to produce many children through captions that constrained meanings. In images of individual children like figure 4.6, the child’s body was used as a symbol of the larger family. In images of several children, like figure 4.7, the children were used as proof that the racial discourse of fecundity is valid. In images of singular or a few white appearing children, I did not find caption commentary about how many children were in the entire family. In cases with portraits of white appearing children, the captions generally identified the child or children in the frame by age, location and relation to a farm community (e.g. son of tenant farmer). The contrast between caption practices with images of children who appeared Mexican and those who appeared white highlights the impact of dominant discourses of race and gender on the photographic unit’s approach to making pictures of marginalized populations.



FIGURE 4.7 Mexican miner's children feeding chickens in the kitchen. Their mother is thirty years old and has had ten children, by Marion Post Wolcott, 1938.

Figure 4.7 reads like the first frame of a series of portraits. The subjects, four children, sit close together, the smallest in the lap of the oldest. Only one of the four looks towards, but not directly at, the camera. The other three look in different directions; they are distracted, like children often are. One offers food to the birds at their feet. As noted in analysis of figure 4.4, showing birds in the house, specifically the kitchen, was likely a gesture towards the presence of disease. The distance between the camera and the subjects translates into an image more like a snapshot than a formal portrait. The possible reasons for this approach include difficulty getting all of the

children to sit together and rushing to set the camera (there is even a finger obstructing the bottom left corner of the frame).

On its surface, this image could hold many possible interpretations, but paired with its caption, the possible stories are reduced to a racialized rendering of Mexican mothers as fecund. There are only four children shown, but the caption positions the reader to understand that the four bodies are actually representative of a much larger family, “Their mother is thirty years old and has had ten children.” The image is no longer about the children within the image; instead they become symbols for the large families that all Mexican mothers threaten to produce on US soil. Captions like these reflect nativist ideologies about the right size of a family and of protecting the Nation. The images of good motherhood depicted women in a range of circumstances, but their presence in these circumstances were often framed sympathetically, as connected to deserving poor. Many of the images that represent the domestic sphere of Mexican homes, do so as connected to dirt or clutter, both characterized by the FSA as signs of insufficient sanitation. The mother is implicated in these images through her failure to maintain the space.

Conclusion

The majority of Mexican families in the US during the Depression were constructed as non-citizens and as threat. Within the FSA photographic unit this construction occurred through two intersecting processes of image making. First, Mexicans were depicted as non-citizen via their marginalization and erasure from FSA photographs; images of rural Mexicans in the US were largely not taken, not printed, and/or not circulated because they did not conform to the construction of good, possible, representative FSA client families. The racializing discourses

about Mexicans also meant that images of families who read as Mexican would be unlikely to garner popular support for FSA projects. By conforming to the dominant construction of good, possible, and representative FSA client families, the circulated FSA photographs served as a racial project, visually reinforcing whiteness as contingent for the categories client, deserving poor, good mother, and citizen. Leaving Mexican subjects outside of the circulated frame, the FSA photographic unit functioned as visual rhetoric which discursively, through exclusion, reinforced and circulated existing racializations of Mexicans in the US as contagion, racially and biologically inferior and dangerously fecund. The second process reinforced the Mexican body as non-citizen through the few frames in which Mexicans in the US were the focus. The presence of Mexicans within FSA images is marginal but still central to understanding how an entire rural population could be visually and discursively erased from the national consciousness. Unlike the popularly circulated images, the invisible collection presents, through image-caption pairs, the Mexican mother within a limited, racializing, and gendered frame. Within the images of Mexican mothers and domesticity, the discourses of the infected Mexican body and the hyper-fertile Mexican woman are apparent.

Just as the circulated content from the FSA Historical Section did not contain the entire picture of rural poverty, so is the status of the 998. The 998 does not tell so much about the lives of impoverished rural Mexicans in the US during the Depression as they do about the instruction from Stryker and the FSA office, the photographers' perspective, and the impact of constructions of Mexican mothers and domestic space. There is always more beyond the frame because the frame is inherently a device bounded by selection. The absence of Mexican families from circulated images visually reinforced their exclusion from classification as possible clients, as deserving and as rural Americans. Considering the 998 as an invisible collection, a collection

generally uncirculated, the abundance of workspace images and lack of domestic space reflects the commitment of the FSA, the Historical Section, and the media in terms of representing this specific group of disenfranchised mothers and families. The frames within the 998 that depict domestic space and motherhood do so from limited perspectives which suggest a racialized Other. Many of the images of internal space, the domestic sphere, and mothers contain elements similar to the “before” images in progress photographs. In spite of the similarity, the presence of dirt, disease, and poor diet would have not been read as an example of “before” rehabilitation for Mexican families—because Mexican families were constructed as not possibly rehabilitatable. The “before” progress images were often connected to the possibility of change through captions or by proximity to “after” images. Images of Mexican families excluded from circulation were not placed in proximity to “after” images. There is also a distinct absence of “after” images in the 998, of which only two images contain a caption that identifies the subjects as “clients.”

By looking broadly and closely at the invisible collection, I have come to believe that the contents present a limited, racialized, gendered approach that reflects the dominant national discourses regarding Mexicans in the US at the time. The images, circulated and the invisible collection, all serve to inform how the edges of the frame were determined. What made it in, and what did not, was largely the result of national racializations which delineated who was and who was not a citizen.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION: SO THE FSA MADE A FARMER

You see, in the end, the 270,000 or 250,000 pictures are only going to be significant if somebody goes in and takes 15 of them, one of them, 50 of them, and does something. He does an article, makes an exhibit...tells a story in such a way that apparently it intrigues the people who've looked at the magazine for years and like it. I think that's the answer--what can somebody do with it?¹

Roy Stryker to Richard K. Doud

Stryker reflects that historically the archive is only significant if someone decides to use it. Today, there is little doubt that the File has been used; I question, however, how it has been used. The File is broad, as Stryker notes, but I would argue that the specific and limited use of the images within suggests the archive was significant as a tool that reflected and reinforced a hegemonic national imaginary of rural poverty in the US. While the Historical Section was active, circulated images of families were almost exclusively white. White appearing families were shown in articles that contributed to the overarching goal of “selling” rehabilitation to the popular US audience. As part of this circulation, the centralized representation of white appearing families constructed white rural families in connection to the category “deserving poor.” The Historical Section was discursively powerful in its ability to define (or redefine) the Nation’s conception of itself, but by reinforcing national identities as white, Mexicans in the US were further marginalized from US citizen identities. In the representations of Mexicans within the FSA photographs, they are constructed within limited, racializing frameworks providing further evidence of the presence and maintenance of national racializing discourses in FSA processes. As part of a federal program to help rural Americans (i.e. US citizens), these depictions not only limited who was imagined as deserving poor, good mother, and possible client but also who was imagined as possible rural US citizen and even as existing on US land. Each of these identities came visually coded as white.

¹ Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker.

Stryker and the photographers involved in building the File discussed its intended historical significance as a resource upon which future generations might draw insight into the lives of rural Americans during the Depression. The selection processes that determined what circulated during the Depression held consequences for how this vast photographic archive is remembered popularly. In the contemporary moment, the File stands as a representation of America during the Depression just as Stryker had hoped. The images circulated during the Depression are still being used to the exclusion of new or more varied images to reinforce the national amnesia surrounding the Depression in spite of what is an immense and broad photographic archive. This use includes reproduced photographs from the archive and new photographs that draw from FSA photographic themes and aesthetics. Today the File is accessed as evidence of “America” and “Americans” during the Depression. The discourse borne out of FSA photographic selection and circulation remains today in representations of the pastoral landscape and the US farmer as tied to individualism, survival, and patriotism.

The Depression era visual representation of rural mothers and motherhood in the US positioned white appearing women within rural space as possibly good mothers who, through their improved labor within the domestic sphere, could prove valuable to the rehabilitation of the FSA client family. Notably, the FSA rehabilitation program was fundamentally dedicated to better more sustainable farming practices, but the ideal client was not an individual farmer; rather, it was a heteronormative family unit. The content of my work explores the constructions of mothers and motherhood within the construction of client; however, much of the photographic content focused on the identity of the farmer. The visual construction of the US farmer continues to circulate as nostalgia filled identity. The circulation of visual imaginations of farmer and rural mother figure inform the national imaginary regarding the US family farm and who is part of

such a family. The good mother figure is constructed as vital to the farm through her gender specific labor and the reproduction of the nation and sons who will maintain the farm land in the future. The good farmer is imagined as laboring through manual labor on the farm and teaching sons how to do the same.

Understanding the archive through a critical lens of whiteness allows consideration of “some of the ways that white has exerted its force on everybody else...through invisibility, that everything-ness.”² Nakayama and Krizek theorize whiteness as un-interrogated space (in the US) that is rhetorically constructed as the norm. Utilized within FSA photographic circulation, whiteness functioned as non-color and thereby discursively universal.³ Nakayama and Krizek argue that ideologies of whiteness inextricably tied to those of Americanness conflate categories of race and nation. In effect, “as a discursive strategy, the conflation of whiteness and US citizenship challenges the very notion of a nation of immigrants; yet the persistence of this discourse reflects territorial claims to vital political terrain.”⁴ The effect of centralizing whiteness as a requisite of citizenship in circulated FSA images reinforced public fictions which conflated race and nation and served to exclude anyone outside of the category white from the possibility of full citizenship.

Nakayama and Krizek note the use of the discursive universality of whiteness specifically in 21st century marketing. Their study notes a public statement by *J.Crew* after the *The Village Voice* critiqued the dominant whiteness of their marketing strategies. A representative for *J.Crew*

² Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, fourth (PA: Strata Publishing Company, 2010), 634–53. 635.

³ Ibid. 642.

⁴ Ibid. 644.

responded, “we don’t do racial marketing...we try to market to everyone.”⁵ Nakayama and Krizek assert that such marketing strategies reinforce whiteness as neutral and even universal. I find this in the circulation of the FSA photographs during the Depression; by means of not noting whiteness in captions and only including categories of race in images of subjects who appeared Mexican or Black. In this way, whiteness is deployed as universal and as inherently American. This was not a necessary outcome of the File contents in use, but reflects the processes of selection and circulation as reinforcing (rather than challenging or complicating) dominant discourses. These images were not only racialized, but they were gendered in intersectional ways.

Contemporary Implications: “So God Made a Farmer”

The national imaginary that was visually reinforced by FSA photographs during the Depression continues today with regular dependence and referral to well-known FSA images and themes. Popular conceptions of rural American identities continue to rely on white appearing subjects and the family farm in spite of the dominance of corporate farming and a racially diverse rural population. What is so often imagined as an archive valuable in informing about the past, in fact, proves quite valuable in informing about the present. Just as the FSA developed a visual rhetoric in the 1930s to sell an image of the rural US citizen to the Nation, that image is still being sold. As I conclude, I present an analysis of one example of the contemporary circulation of FSA-style imagery and discourse. I present this analysis in order to highlight the ways that the public fictions developed during the Depression continue to circulate in visual representations.

⁵ Ibid. 643.

During the CBS broadcast of Super Bowl XLVII (February 3, 2013) Dodge Ram's commercial "So God Made a Farmer" first aired. Super Bowl ads are among the most expensive and most watched advertisements in the US.⁶ This particular commercial illustrates the continued circulation of FSA visual discourses within the context of contemporary racial formations. The commercial is comprised of a pre-existing voiceover of radio legend Paul Harvey's⁷ 1978 Future Farmers of America Convention (FFA) speech "So God Made a Farmer" paired with thirty-six predominantly black and white photographs of farmers and farmland in the US. Harvey was famous for telling human focused stories about the lives of famous people leaving out the identity of the subject until the very end. The format of "So God Made a Farmer" presents the US farmer in the framework that Harvey would have typically used when discussing a person of "fame."

Upon first viewing the commercial, one may think that the photographs come from Stryker's File. Despite the similarities in subject selection, perspective, and framing which conjure the FSA photographic archive, Dodge commissioned a team of photographers to create the original content. The connection to FSA imagery renders the visual content of the commercial as "real" and possibly objective. The narrative of "God Made a Farmer" is told from the perspective of a Christian god, who tells the story of why the "American farmer" was created. The audience is also encouraged to engage with the content as a literal representation of god's perspective. The narrative raises the farmer to heroic stature while presenting images that

⁶ Super Bowl commercials average 3.8 million dollars for 30 seconds. Super Bowl XLVI was the "most watched U.S. telecast of all time." "The Super Bowl: The Most Expensive 30 Seconds on TV," *Nielsen*, January 25, 2013.

⁷ Paul Harvey began broadcasting his twice daily show "News and Comment" with ABC Radio in 1951 and continued until his death in 2009. Harvey's public persona was built on themes of American tradition, patriotism, and Christian religion. Harvey's voice is still easily recognizable and, as an embodiment of the aforementioned themes, serves as an ideal choice for Dodge's commercial.

elicit the FSA File and the national imaginary regarding what and who is “America.” Such a literal presentation of Haraway’s “god’s eye view” reinforces the perspective presented as objective rather than situated and partial.

The visual construction of the rural US presented in the commercial is quite similar to the discourse borne out of circulated FSA photographs. Specifically, “So God Made a Farmer” uses images that read as straight photographs; it also centralizes white appearing subjects in its construction of “American” farmer. In the presence of contemporary racial projects, additional components, like the use of nostalgia and tokenism, illustrate the way the discourse has shifted over time. The FSA photographic archive is often employed using nostalgia in relation to the pastoral landscape. In a contemporary and media-minded analysis of the pastoral at work in the American Midwest, Victoria Johnson’s *Heartland T.V.* examines the “tenacity of this will [to naturalize Midwest pastoral images] and the variable cultural needs that the Heartland myth addresses as a mythology so persistent and so appealing, even among the people who ‘know’ differently.”⁸ The commercial’s visual content uses American pastoral to communicate themes of rugged individualism in a Promised Land. The independence depicted is both racialized and gendered in its construction of possible farmers and US citizens. The use of black and white images also suggests the past, but that past is brought alive as a presence in today’s world through the interspersed color images. The reclamation and reinforcement of virtuous pasts circulates as a welcome performance, an apparently unifying image devoid of the national tensions that exist in everyday life.

The commercial contains themes that coincide with FSA constructions of gendered and racialized citizens in the rural US. The commercial centralizes whiteness through the identity of

⁸ Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). 31.

the narrator, Harvey, who the audience is likely to know as white, and through the photographs. Of the thirty six included photographs, seventeen contain fully visibly human subjects, twelve of these are white male appearing subjects, and two show subjects who appear to be white and female. Only two images are of people of color. The commercial primarily depicts the white, male farmer. Although not the primary focus of my research, the depiction of this farmer does similar work of constructing possible rural identities and marginalizing Others on the basis of race and gender.

Gendered Labor: The Family Table Revisited

The commercial's narrative and visual content reinforce constructions of the possible "American" farmer, a family farmer who performs manual labor on US land. The farmer is presented as white, male, and US citizen, conflating categories of nation, race, and gender. One of the final images is a close portrait of a white appearing, male farmer who functions as a metonym for US farmers as the narrative presents the dénouement, a narrative of rebirth, of a new generation of farmers with the line: "When his son says that he wants to spend his life doing what dad does." From Harvey's narration, the gender of the farmer is identified for the first time, through pronoun "he" and titles "son" and "dad," as necessarily male. Race is never mentioned in words; instead, whiteness is centralized through photographic representation. Following the aforementioned image, a portrait of young boy appears to symbolize next generation of farmers; he is white appearing, wears a work jacket, and holds a cowboy hat to his heart. This boy signifies constructions of rural identities distinctly tied to the national imaginary borne out of the FSA Photographic File.

Just as the FSA imagined women as clients who strengthened the family farm through gender-specific labor within the domestic sphere, the Dodge commercial shows women in similarly limited ways. The two photographs which include subjects who appear both white and female place them first at the family meal, which she presumably prepared, and second, in concert with a line referencing a “school board meeting.” Both meal preparation and overseeing education for children remain heavily feminized. The image which appears with the line “somebody who’d bale a family together with the soft, strong bonds of sharing” appeals to family values and traditional gender roles within the domestic sphere. The photograph shows a white appearing family seated for dinner, recalling the FSA’s reproduction of good client families sharing meals (fig. 3.3). The father sits at the head of the table; all are close, shoulder-to-shoulder around a bountiful table. Each head is bowed in prayer. While the commercial focuses on the importance of the farmer in the landscape, the inclusion of this photograph reinforces that the farmer is not a single man but as part of a heteronormative family. Limiting the representation of white appearing women in “So God Made a Farmer” to the domestic sphere reflects and reinforces the visual construction of good mothers in rural US space as part of a rural farm structure which is imagined as heteronormative and white. In this case, the representation also highlights the gender-specific labor for which mothers are responsible while demarcating the spaces in which they are imagined as not belonging (manual labor). The white mother, as good mother, is marginalized from the central sphere of the commercial’s narrative, manual labor on the farm; however, she is included in the imagined category of US farm family.

Through limited inclusion of marginalized subjects, tokenism is utilized in order to reinforce FSA constructions of the farmer and farm family within contemporary racial formations. The “real” farmer is established during the first half of the commercial, which is

composed solely of white, male appearing bodies within rural landscapes. Towards the end of the commercial, to the line “and tie the fleece and strain the milk,” the audience sees a couple who appear Mexican, man and woman, depicted selling farm products at a local farm stand. The products, including smoked chorizo and tortilla chips, would likely connote Mexican identity to an Anglo audience. Notably, this couple is not performing the manual labor that is associated with independent survival through US farming. They pose as both a contrast to that which is presented as normative and neutral, and as a veil over that which is persistently oppressed. The scene reinforces the narrative of white patriarchal norms and further marginalizes the Mexican couple standing, outside, with a table of food for sale as non-normative, not farmer, and not US citizen.

Lasting Impact: Public Fictions

Nostalgia works throughout the commercial to hail a better time as possibly in existence today. Accepting the hegemonic nationalism Dodge is selling appears to hearken happiness. In the final frame the words “To the farmer in all of us” appear across the screen. The conclusion of the commercial invites viewers, through shared national imaginaries, to identify with the constructed image of the farmer. However, this depiction and its invitation reinforce dominant ideologies while erasing any reference to the erasure and oppression that must necessarily remain in tandem with the aforementioned ideologies. This final moment begs the question: who has the opportunity to identify with this image? Who is “all of us”? Those identities excluded from “all of us” are discursively excluded from the categories of possibly farmer, possibly farm family, possibly US citizen, and even more broadly, excluded from possibly existing or belonging in the US.

The dominant photographic representations borne out of the Historical Section continue to influence contemporary racial projects. Dodge's commercial mobilizes public memory in connection to the FSA photographic depictions of the rural family in the US, particularly farmers. Those subjects excluded from the circulated frame during the Depression have yet to be reentered into the national consciousness. The invisibility of the 1935 Migrant Mother continues to this day in the popular memory of who was rural, poor, and possible citizen in the rural US during the Depression. The construction of possible rural US citizen, in which contemporary US farmers are still imagined as part of heteronormative, white family units, has lasting implications for Mexicans in the US, particularly women. The maintenance of exclusive whiteness in the construction of rural US subjects reinforces constructions of Mexican appearing subjects as not possibly US citizens and as not belonging or existing in the rural US. Natalia Molina argues that the constructions of Mexicans during the Depression "led to 'public fictions'...that shaped the members' life chances."⁹ The FSA reinforced these public fictions through their circulated content during the Depression and that content continues to inform the national imaginary today.

While the findings may appear bleak, I would suggest that research and other efforts, grassroots or otherwise, which commit to understanding why and how dominant discourses are reinforced provide openings for disrupting public fictions. Within this research, I focus on the role of cultural representation, specifically photography, as public discourse which can reinforce and reflect dominant discourses. Notably, it is through the use of the visual that I believe there is an opening for change. I do not believe that focusing efforts for change entirely on taking more diverse images will shift the national imaginary of who is "American." In the case of the FSA, the Historical Section amassed a more diverse body of photographs than the popular audience

⁹ Molina 157.

would ever see.

With a focus on that which is visual, I also acknowledge the conjunction between representation and social structure¹⁰ in constructing the spaces in which we live. If the national imaginary of who is possibly a citizen were to begin to shift, there would need to be change in both structure and representation. My findings suggest a need for a shift in popular representation, specifically more diverse images circulated in more varied contexts. Second, my findings also suggest a need for a shift in seeing photographs. Such a naturalized process (how we understand a photograph) can only change through visual media education that effectively challenges the viewer to engage critically with media of all kinds. The implications for reimagining media extend beyond the FSA/OWI Photograph Collection to other photographic collections and forms of media. In the end, disrupting national imaginaries of citizen and other hegemonic constructions of identity is a slow and shifting process; but by bringing that which is holding the structure in place out into the public sphere, dismantling, then, becomes a possibility.

¹⁰ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.

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